SERIOUS COMEDY:

HOW LATE-NIGHT SHOWS FRAMED COVID-19

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by

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HOW LATE-NIGHT SHOWS FRAMED COVID-19

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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________________________________________________
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________________________________________________
Dr. Amanda Hinnant
Dedication

I’d like to thank all of the wonderful professors that I’ve had at the University of Missouri and especially Sara Hiles for making Vox such a great publication to be a part of these past two years. To my friends Gaby, Madi, Grace, and Wes for always answering my panicked late-night texts and crushing any “jokes” about dropping out of school. And to my boyfriend Alex for humoring my procrastination (i.e., much-needed rest) with wine and Schitt’s Creek. Biggest thanks of all to my family — Dad, Mom, Callie, Rachel (and Smokey) — for always supporting me even from halfway across the country. As silly as it might seem, I’d also like to thank the numerous late-night hosts, who have kept their audiences (myself included) laughing and informed through the confusion and scariness of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
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SERIOUS COMEDY: 
HOW LATE-NIGHT SHOWS FRAMED COVID-19

Grace Cooper

Dr. Ryan J. Thomas, Associate Professor of Journalism Studies

ABSTRACT

During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, late-night shows served as alternative news sources. This thesis analyzed how late-night shows used storytelling strategies to frame the pandemic as a serious issue at a time when news about the virus was often confusing and unclear. Through a textual analysis of the videos and accompanying transcripts, this research analyzed 28 episodes of six late-night shows, following a timeline of eight major COVID-related events from March, 2020 to April, 2021. The study identified 14 strategies that the late-night hosts employed to break down and frame complex news events relating to the pandemic. These findings can benefit the field of journalism by providing a different perspective and toolkit for engaging audiences.
Chapter One: Introduction

In a 2004 episode of the CNN political debate show *Crossfire*, the comedian and host of Comedy Central’s *Daily Show* Jon Stewart famously ridiculed the show and its co-host Tucker Carlson. “You’re on CNN,” Stewart said, explaining that the show before his is “puppets making prank phone calls.” Despite Stewart’s protestation that late-night comedy does not have the same “responsibility to the public discourse” that news programming does, U.S. audiences have long turned to news satire as relief from the onslaught of bad news on television, in print, and online (Hersey, 2013). Knowingly or unknowingly, this source of entertainment has become an alternative news source, supplementing the news diets of those who do (Young & Tisinger, 2006) and do not (Pew Research Center, 2004a) regularly consume their news from traditional news outlets, such as major newspapers or broadcast networks. Researchers have long examined how late-night shows and the hosts themselves dabble in the realm of journalism, particularly through opening monologues in which hosts joke about topical events and their political guests (Bailey, 2018; Feldman, 2007; Parkin, 2010). On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart was even known to break stories, an uncommon phenomenon in today’s late-night landscape but a valuable example of a show’s host and writers taking on the role of journalists. Stewart has acknowledged that his show served as a supplement to the news, requiring previous knowledge that the show creators assume the audience possesses, but argued that it should not be a news source itself (Young, 2013).

Despite not being an original news source most of the time, even in the run-of-the-mill monologue, the late-night hosts and writers use specific storytelling devices to break down complex news topics and engage audiences in the subject matter. This study
is based on the idea that the fields of comedy and journalism can benefit one another. As audiences increasingly look to alternative news sources for their daily news (Gottfried & Anderson, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2004b), the narrative strategies of these shows warrant consideration.

**Rationale for Study**

The boundary between journalism and news satire has been said to have recently softened and even found to overlap, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey, 2018; Feldman, 2007; Hersey, 2013). The beginning of the pandemic created a unique news cycle in which official sources inadvertently published misinformation or corrected previous statements as new information came to light (Anderson et al., 2021). While news outlets struggled to control the narrative surrounding the pandemic as information about the virus evolved, late-night shows like *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, seemingly presented a united front, urging viewers to take the pandemic seriously and follow safety guidelines. Though there is research about late-night shows in many contexts (see, e.g., Kilby, 2018; Peifer, 2013; Stewart, 2007), the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to examine how these shows have served audiences in ways that traditional news outlets may not have.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the storytelling techniques that late-night talk show hosts use to make complex news events more accessible to audiences that may or may not consume news from traditional media outlets. My central research question was: **What storytelling strategies did U.S. talk show hosts use to explain major COVID-19 news events to their audiences during the first year of the pandemic?** I sought
to determine if the hosts of these shows employed storytelling strategies that journalists themselves could use. This research is necessary because it can be used to inform journalists of ways that they might incorporate different storytelling strategies into their reporting to engage audiences that don’t typically consume their news from traditional outlets, such as major newspapers.

**Preview**

In the following chapter, I will review the literature on framing theory and studies linking late-night shows or satire and journalism, including historical background on the topic and studies relating to audience, media literacy, political engagement, and credibility. In evaluating relevant literature, I also will identify limitations and gaps in the research that inform my research questions.

The third chapter will provide an overview of the methods for this qualitative research. I will explain the rationale behind my use of textual analysis as well as detail the procedure I have established, including the specific COVID-19 events and corresponding late-night shows I analyzed and why.

In chapter four, I will discuss the findings of this study guided by my two research questions. I will include analysis and examples of the 14 strategies I identified: rebranding, interviewing expert guests, making a personal appeal, talking about the big stories first, defining new terms, acknowledging confusion or emotions, talking about international stories, making comparisons to fictional scenarios, evoking a “we’re all in this together” mentality, getting serious, contextualizing and fact-checking misinformation, citing sources, breaking down complex topics, and stressing caution over
panic. I will also discuss how each host employed those strategies to frame the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss the significance of these findings both theoretically and practically. I did encounter some obstacles during this study that will be explored in the limitations section of the chapter. I will also provide recommendations for future researchers who wish to build up or recreate this research within a new context.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will explain how framing theory will guide this research and evaluate the literature on the intersection between late-night shows, satire, and journalism. After discussing framing theory, this chapter will establish what qualifies as an alternative news source and examine the relationship between satire and journalism. Next, the review will summarize relevant audience research, including research relating to media literacy, political engagement, and the use of comedy as an educational tool. Lastly, I will review studies that explore the potential for incorporating aspects of news satire into journalism. This nascent field is important for my research into the ways that journalists can benefit from the comedic storytelling strategies used by news satirists.

Framing Theory

Through the lens of framing theory, I’ll be examining how late-night shows framed major news events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Davis and Kent (2006) apply the basic tenants of framing theory to journalism, observing that “news must be framed in order to be understood” (p. 1). They argue that journalism is about presenting the facts and telling the reader what and how to think about those facts, saying, “journalists cannot avoid framing important issues and events since framing is essential to effective communication” (p. 2). Since I will be looking at late-night shows with the assumption that they serve as a news source (or even the sole news source) for some of their audience, it makes sense to look at framing theory as it relates to journalism and journalists.

From sourcing to language used in the headline to the story itself, all journalists make editorial decisions that, whether purposefully or inadvertently, “frames” their story:
Journalists frame news stories; that is, they package stories and, in the process of doing so, give stories meaning. Framing is about the choices that journalists make in the reporting of stories. Journalists’ choices, in turn, affect the way that stories are interpreted by consumers of news. As Price and Tewksbury explain, the way stories are packaged “systematically affect[s] how political events are perceived by the public. [Frames] alter the...considerations people use in forming their opinions” (Pfau et al., 2004, p. 76).

However, there is a difference between “news frames” and “advocate frames” (Tewksbury et al., 2000). The purpose of the first is to inform, while the second is meant to persuade (Fisher, 2015).

As one of the more prominent examples of news satire, Saturday Night Live’s (SNL hereafter) “Weekend Update” is a good case study in looking at the role of framing in the creation of satire, which can be a valuable tool for audiences to become aware of specific news events. Peifer (2013) examined the framing of SNL and the political dynamics that result, focusing on the show’s portrayal of the 2008 Republican Party nominee for Vice President, Sarah Palin. Through a content analysis of SNL sketches, Peifer identified four frames – beauty, faith, competence, and folksiness – and concludes that a “framing approach can serve as a point of convergence for contrasting epistemological approaches to political humor research” (p. 155). This study provides valuable insight into how satire can be analyzed through the lens of framing theory.

Defining Alternative News Sources

Late-night shows have emerged as seemingly credible alternative news source. For the purposes of this research, I define alternative news sources as any informational medium outside of traditional news outlets, such as newspapers, broadcast, and radio programs. Abel and Barthel (2013) say alternative news sources include commentary, parody, and online content. However, unlike Abel and Barthel, I would include satire,
drawing a distinction between satire and parody. The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines satire as “a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.” and parody as “imitation that can be in the form of a musical or literary work.” For the sake of this research, parody will be defined as a fabricated story resembling real-life events, such as a political cartoon or a fictional sketch, and satire as the application of humor to the retelling of a news event. This study will focus on satire, which will be defined as content consisting of jokes and commentary on an existing news event, such as in late-night shows.

News satire like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* should be considered alternative news sources for audiences and not competitors of journalists (Hersey, 2013). Hersey says these shows serve audiences by “functioning both as news in their own right and as a corrective to traditional journalism grounded in objectivity” (p. 2). While the audience preference for late-night shows over traditional news sources induced panic in many journalists and organizations, Hersey argues that this was a particular moment of reckoning in journalism in which the field needed to consider the role of the Internet in the news diets of young people and incorporate and innovate accordingly.

Another sub-category of alternative news sources is infotainment. Marinov (2020) says infotainment, a term coined in the 1980s, holds varying meanings and calls on researchers to identify a standardized definition. “Infotainment” broadly refers to content that combines aspects of informational programming with the purpose of entertainment. Late-night talk shows fit very squarely into that basic understanding of the concept, as they are meant to be entertaining but also function as news sources in varying ways. Late-
night shows take on a variety of roles as news satire, alternative news sources, infotainment, and – as will be explored in this study – journalism.

**Scholarship on 2000s Late-Night Shows**

Much of the research on news satire in the U.S. focuses on late-night shows that came into mainstream popularity in the early 2000s, mainly *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Because of this growing popularity and shift in audience consumption, scholars have emphasized the similarities between satire and journalism rather than the differences. Baym (2005) analyzed *The Daily Show* as “an experiment in journalism.” The author redefines “real” versus “fake” news in the scope of news satire, establishing the legitimacy of the show as a news source and eschewing its self-given title of “fake news.” Baym framed the show as a teaching tool for political journalism, examining the role that the show plays in the lives of younger audiences. This research also broke down how *The Daily Show* served as an example of what political journalism could be, combining techniques used by the news, comedy, and television talk shows. Faina (2013) examined the lasting impact of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* on journalism, characterizing the two hosts as trusted journalists while reckoning with the competing roles they perform as critics of journalism but also as members of the field as they used humor to engage the public and embrace “social complexity” (p. 547).

Late-night shows, particularly *The Daily Show*, have been credited with breaking the long-held barrier between news satire and traditional journalism. Feldman (2013) conducted a content analysis of trade publications and other relevant popular publications of the time and concluded:
Emerging from this analysis is the way in which journalists are using *The Daily Show* as an occasion to reflect upon the nature of their work and the current state of their profession. For many journalists, *The Daily Show* has prompted reconsideration of the once rigid distinction between news and entertainment and of the historical conventions used to enforce this distinction. (p. 1)

Overall, Feldman eschews the idea that young people are to blame for not consuming traditional news; rather, it is journalism that needs to adapt, perhaps beginning with acknowledging the value of emerging alternative news sources. Through this research, Feldman finds that objectivity, or rather what she refers to as the “illusion of objectivity,” plays a critical role in what news young people choose to consume. The study looks specifically at the role of objectivity in young audience members’ preference for comedic or traditional news in terms of what they perceive as aloofness or condescension on the part of traditional journalists. Although the limitations of objectivity are commonly talked about now, Feldman’s analysis feels ahead of its time in terms of how she parses and explains the difference between the historical definition of objectivity found in news publications and the subjectivity – or more human element – incorporated into news satire. Feldman concludes that *The Daily Show* created a critical moment that calls for journalists to adapt and change. I would argue that this trend still exists and may even be stronger in 2021 with the popularization of shows like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Not only does *The Daily Show* poke fun at the official sources that audiences sometimes perceive journalists as working together with, but it also pokes fun at the institution of journalism itself.

If news satire can be considered journalism, then perhaps the most apt label for categorizing late-night shows would be to call them examples of advocacy journalism. Kilby (2018) evaluated how television news satire took on aspects of advocacy journalism to encourage civic engagement during the Trump administration, by focusing
on reporting on stories from under-represented and misrepresented groups and identifying motivational frames geared toward audiences. The researcher is critical of satire, saying that one limitation of TV satire in particular is that it “often preaches to a converted audience, the potential impact of which can lead to a repudiation of deliberative politics and increased political disengagement” (Kilby, 2018, p. 1934). However, Kilby concluded that under the Trump administration, satire has transitioned into a form of advocacy journalism, adding credibility to the idea that news satire can be journalism. Through a content analysis of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver and Full Frontal, Kilby identified “themes associated with solution and motivational framing” (p. 1937). Kilby’s study is an important building block for this research as it captures themes that are also effective storytelling strategies employed by late-night hosts, such as hosts taking on the role of the citizen surrogate.

Political bias can affect a viewer’s perception of news entertainment and consequently what they consider to be news. Edgerly and Vraga (2019) explored how partisan audiences define news, looking at specific aspects of a story such as how publications, including satirical outlets, frame headlines and attribute sources. Their research also examines the influence of satirical elements in traditional publications on audience perception of “news-ness,” finding that satirical headlines and shows like The Daily Show are generally perceived as less newsy.

**Satire’s Impact on Audiences**

Multiple studies have examined how satire and late-night shows affect trust, perceived credibility, knowledge of the news, and the overall experience of the viewer. Littau and Stewart (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study to evaluate how audiences
perceived the credibility of traditional news shows after watching *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Through a survey and content analysis of four episodes, the researchers established that news programs tended to be portrayed negatively in the late-night shows. Consequently, audiences perceived the news shows as having less credibility. Littau and Stewart said satire helps keep the institution of the mainstream media in check: “It is arguable *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are helping to educate audiences about what news is and the role of the journalist in public discourse” (p. 17). Like other satire researchers, Littau and Stewart found that the audiences of these shows are generally very informed and media-literate and recommended that traditional news outlets look for ways to keep the interest of audiences in comparison to alternative news sources.

Audiences are drawn to late-night shows not only to enjoy the humor, but also to learn new information. Young (2013) surveyed university students and found that most people who watched satire shows, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, said they did so for entertainment, but the second most common reason was to acquire knowledge. Additionally, 40 percent of those who watched these shows said it was because they “made news fun.” Most of the people who avoided watching the shows said they found the shows uninteresting or preferred other genres, and some said they lacked the political knowledge to fully understand and appreciate the jokes made on the shows. Young noted that Jon Stewart considered his show to be a sort of supplement to the news requiring previous knowledge.

Media literacy can also lead to increased political engagement. Stewart (2007) revisited the idea of “The Daily Show Effect,” established by Baumgartner and Morris
(2006), which states that viewers of The Daily Show had increased feelings of political efficacy but less trust in political candidates. Stewart found that infotainment “soft news” and traditional “hard news” both affected audience political engagement positively but only “hard news” positively affected viewers’ trust of political candidates. Stewart strives to reframe political distrust:

If The Daily Show and The Colbert Report are, in fact, contributing to increased political participation, the increased political distrust more common to the viewers of this breed of political satire may be more representative of… “healthy skepticism” about government… Rather than fostering cynicism, as suggested by Baumgartner & Morris as part of “The Daily Show Effect,” viewers may instead be more likely to engage in political discussion and efforts at influencing change in officeholders and government policy, which are among the aspects of political participation that have sharply declined among young citizens for nearly half a century (p. 14-15).

Stewart concludes that “The Daily Show Effect” is positive and may add value to an audience’s perception of the surrounding political landscape.

Incorporating News Satire into Journalism

One main difference between journalists and satirists is that satirists often use emotion to get their point across. Bas and Grabe (2015) say that the “emotion-provoking personalization of the news” may close the knowledge gap between readers of varying education levels. This study found that incorporating emotion into eight investigative news stories led to less of a knowledge gap between readers of varying education levels. More research needs to be done into how satirists use emotion to learn how journalists can appeal to their audiences while still maintaining a level of authority.

As some publications struggle to engage audiences in longform investigative journalism, comedy may be an effective tool for increasing audience engagement. A study paired an investigative environmental journalism team with stand-up comics who incorporated material from the investigation into their acts. Comics gave stand-up
performances in front of two audiences, and researchers gathered results via post-show surveys asking viewers what they thought of the show and testing their knowledge of the information covered. The comics were able to “translate” complex topics, an important aspect of news satire. It was a positive experience for collaborators and educational for the audience, serving as a relevant real-life example of how elements of comedy can be incorporated into traditional news outlets (Chattoo & Green-Barber, 2021). Similarly, Peifer and Myrick (2019) conducted an experiment online incorporating satire into the content at a traditional news media outlet, The Boston Globe, and measured how it impacted audience perception and engagement with the publication’s content. The experiment garnered mixed results, as satirical elements posed a risk to audience trust but also could increase engagement and sharing depending on the perceived credibility of the source, which was measured through a “trust scale” created by the researchers. Comingling the benefits of satire with audience trust, resulting in increased engagement, is a potential benefit of the application of satire to traditional news outlets.

**Comedy as an Educational Tool**

The strategy of using humor to engage audiences in complex topics is by no means unique to journalism. Scholars have used comedy as an educational tool in the health field to educate and engage audiences in the hopes of influencing their behavior. For example, Moyer-Gusé, Mahood, and Brookes (2011) attempted to incorporate humor into health messaging about sex education, hoping that this would lead to less risky behavior. Their study used a storyline in Scrubs about an accidental pregnancy as an educational tool to analyze the effect it had on young audiences. In analyzing the results, the researchers found that humor in an unrelated storyline, a “humorous backdrop,”
avoided trivializing the serious topic at hand while also avoiding the topic being associated with negative feelings that could come with dramatizing an already heavy subject. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a similar experiment in a real-life disaster preparedness campaign that talked about the “zombie apocalypse,” using humor via social media. Fraustino and Ma (2015) hoped that the campaign would communicate risk and encourage the audience to take protective measures. Although the campaign succeeded in spreading awareness online, people who viewed the humorous message reported “weaker intentions” to take protective action (p. 236).

**Research Questions**

Based on this review of the literature, we need to know more about how current late-night hosts employ narrative tools to inform their audiences. Given the impact of the pandemic and the subsequent role that late-night shows took on as news sources, it would be valuable to study this period across several different shows. In this field, the following questions still need to be answered:

**RQ1:** What strategies did late-night hosts use to explain complex news events during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**RQ2:** How did the hosts use these techniques to frame COVID-19 as a serious issue?
Chapter Three: Method

This research is best suited for qualitative analysis because this research problem requires inductive interpretation. As Creswell (2013) says, qualitative research involves “data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (p. 4). Textual analysis is the most effective method for this research because of its focus on “the traditions, contexts, usages and meanings of words, concepts and ideas” (Brennen, 2017, p. 14). By analyzing content from a variety of shows that were easily accessible online, I was able to identify how different hosts use different storytelling techniques and what techniques they have in common.

Philosophical Assumptions Informing the Research

This research utilized a constructivist/interpretivism approach, which relies on “generat[ing] or inductively develop[ing] a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 8). Unlike quantitative research, which requires a strict coding system, qualitative researchers “not only incorporate the denotative meanings of words but also embrace the variety of connotative meanings found within language” (Brennen, 2017, p. 15). I relied on interpretation to find meaning in the texts and subsequently identified major strategies to use in my coding as I worked through the texts and videos.

Data Sampling and Collection

Based on the “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline,” I originally identified 10 events in the U.S. that late-night shows may have responded to. This list focused on events rather than numerical milestones during the pandemic in the U.S., such as number of cases, deaths, etc. As major milestones in the pandemic, it was logical to assume that
these events would have been addressed by late-night comedy shows just as they would have been covered by traditional news outlets. However, I ended up removing three of the events because the majority of the shows did not cover the event. The events that were removed were: the first identified case of COVID-19 on January 20, 2020; the start of President Trump’s plan to produce the vaccine called Operation Warp Speed on April 30, 2020; and the C.D.C. announcement that fully-vaccinated people could gather indoors without masks on March 8, 2021. As I continued watching the episodes, I noticed that all of the shows transitioned to remote filming around March 20, 2020, when Gov. Andrew Cuomo issued a stay-at-home order for New York City, so I added that event to the list, resulting in eight total events in this study. These are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Timeline of COVID-19 Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 20, 2020</td>
<td>New York City-based late-night shows transition to remote filming after Gov. Andrew Cuomo issues a stay-at-home order for the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 26, 2020</td>
<td>The U.S. Senate passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2, 2020</td>
<td>President Donald Trump tested positive for COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 11, 2020</td>
<td>The U.S. Food and Drug administration approved the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 11, 2021</td>
<td>One year had passed since the W.H.O. declared COVID-19 a pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13, 2021</td>
<td>The C.D.C. recommended pausing vaccinations with the Johnson &amp; Johnson vaccine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My goal when originally planning this study was to include enough events and shows that would result in the analysis of 30 episodes. After watching all 42 episodes that
aired on or around the days of the events (some episodes related to multiple events, depending on the show’s schedule), I identified 28 episodes relating to total of 32 events (with a few episodes covering multiple events). Therefore, despite the removal of three events and the addition of one, I still reached my approximate goal in terms of the content I thought was manageable for this study. For each event, I analyzed how six of the top-rated late-night shows responded and talked about the news events, including: The Late Show Stephen Colbert (CBS), Jimmy Kimmel Live! (ABC), The Daily Show with Trevor Noah (Comedy Central), Full Frontal with Samantha Bee (TBS), Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO), and SNL’s “Weekend Update” (NBC). My primary method of research was textual analysis of those shows and their transcripts.

Each show is on a different network and therefore range in format, ratings, and reputation. While it was important to study shows that are popular and therefore have a large audience, it was also important to look beyond ratings in selecting a sample of shows. All these shows and their hosts are known for tackling news topics in different ways. The Late Show Stephen Colbert was the most-watched late show for the fifth year in a row in the 2021-2022 season, averaging 2.95 million total viewers (White, 2021). Colbert has spent a lot of his career talking about the news, most famously as host of The Colbert Report. In that same season, Jimmy Kimmel Live! had the second most total viewers at 1.75 million, beating out The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon for the first time (White, 2021). As the host of one of the most popular late-night programs, Kimmel is also known for expressing his own politics, particularly under the Trump administration. In a July 2021 article, the L.A. Times called The Daily Show with Trevor Noah “the most influential late-night comedy of the last 25 years” (Ali & Lloyd, 2021). A
lot of previous research focuses on Trevor Noah’s predecessor on *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, so it will be interesting to study the show’s relationship with the news under new leadership. As comedy is a male-dominated industry, it was important to include a female host in this sample. *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, now in its sixth season on *TBS*, is a weekly satirical news show that heavily relies on “reporting” out in the field, offering yet another format of late-night show to examine. John Oliver’s show should be included in this list as he devotes entire shows to delving into specific news topics and events. In April 2020, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* hit a season high of one million viewers during its live show (Ramos, 2020). *SNL*’s “Weekend Update” segment often talks about the news in a different format than the more traditional late-night shows. The show, now in its 47th season on *NBC*, has garnered a loyal following and a long legacy. The segment currently itself has two hosts, Colin Jost and Michael Che, who simulate a traditional newscast with occasional guests, differing from the single-host monologue that most late-night shows employ. While these hosts differ in many ways, their shows are considered mainstream, and their politics are publicly known to be liberal. It is important to note, then, that this study was not contrasting how the COVID-19 pandemic was characterized across the political spectrum but *how hosts of mainstream late-night shows framed the pandemic as a serious issue*.

As these shows are made for a viewing audience, I thought it was important to watch and listen foremost, merely using the transcripts as a guide to code and document my observations. I watched four of the six shows on their respective streaming platforms: “*Weekend Update*” on Hulu, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* on HBO and Amazon Prime Video, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* on Amazon Prime Video, and *The Daily
Show with Trevor Noah on Comedy Central. Jimmy Kimmel Live! and The Late Show with Stephen Colbert were not available as full episodes on any streaming platform, so I went back chronologically through each show’s public YouTube channel and pieced together the episodes from video clips, creating a playlist for each show that was cross-referenced with an episode list on either Amazon Prime Video or IMDB. For a full list of the titles, air dates, and platforms of each episode, see Appendix A.

Two to eight episodes per show were coded for 14 narrative strategies discussed in more detail below. Table 2 indicates which specific episodes were analyzed. (Note: Green indicates that an episode addressed the event; yellow means that the episode talked about COVID-19 but did not cover the specific event in detail; and red indicates that the episode did not talk about the event or COVID-19).

Table 2: Episodes that Addressed COVID-19 Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event/Date</th>
<th>Jimmy Kimmel Live!</th>
<th>The Late Show</th>
<th>The Daily Show</th>
<th>Full Frontal</th>
<th>Last Week Tonight</th>
<th>“Weekend Update”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
### Data Analysis

To transcribe each episode, I used the automated transcription tool Otter and simultaneously took notes in a Google Doc. Then, I determined which episodes would be analyzed, cleaned the portions of the transcripts that dealt with the topic of the timeline or COVID-19 in general. In my textual analysis, I coded for storytelling strategies that I believed helped audiences better understand the COVID-related topic at hand. I compiled a preliminary list of codes I predicted would be present based on my own observation as a late-night show audience member. I edited and added to that list as I watched the episodes, resulting in 14 strategies, half of which are used by journalists and the other half that are unique to late-night shows. I then went back over my transcripts and notes to compile relevant examples of those strategies for analysis. I created what Creswell (2013) calls a “qualitative codebook” (p. 199) – that is, a detailed key for my codes – as I went through the content. This can be found in Appendix B. The analysis was undertaken from late January to April in 2022.
Trustworthiness

To ensure the validity of my data analysis, I employed triangulation, meaning “using multiple methods to view a single object” (Huettman, 1993, p. 42). As discussed in the previous section, my primary method was qualitative research in the form of textual analysis by analyzing both video recordings and transcripts. Using multiple methods helped to ensure the credibility of my analysis by relying on multiple sources of data.

Researcher’s Role

As I am a big fan of late-night television and comedy in general, reflexivity played an important role in my research collection and data analysis. As defined by Creswell (2013), reflexivity is when “the inquirer reflects about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data” (p. 185). My previous knowledge of these shows and their hosts, particularly well-known criticism of them, I believe worked in my favor to improve the validity of my data and analysis. However, I also acknowledge that I may have been biased in my viewing of these shows as I am a fan and more likely to see value in the role the late-night shows play in the lives of the viewers, which I address and discuss when analyzing my data.

Summary

As a sector of late-night audiences look to hosts of the shows for their regular news, journalists may be able to learn something from this medium to engage new audiences in traditional news outlets. The purpose of this study is to analyze a variety of late-night shows in order to identify narrative strategies used to explain news events
during the pandemic and frame COVID-19 as a serious health issue. Available literature suggests late-night shows take on the role of news providers and influence audiences on everything from media literacy and political engagement to the media’s perceived trust and credibility. Researchers in this field have experimented with incorporating humor into learning, from investigative journalism stories to sex education curricula. As a constantly evolving conversation, the relationship between these two fields presents an opportunity to provide an updated look at how late-night television shows have explained the news during the beginning of the pandemic.

To summarize, this qualitative research consists of textual analysis in which I interpret a total of 28 late-night shows relating to 8 major events during the pandemic in the pandemic. For each event, this research analyzed the videos and transcripts of at least three shows from the six that are included in this study. The purpose of the analysis of those texts was to identify storytelling strategies that the hosts used to frame the pandemic as a serious health crisis.
Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify the narrative strategies that late-night hosts employed to frame COVID-19 as a serious issue during the first year or so of the pandemic. This research included a content analysis of episodes of six late-night shows — Jimmy Kimmel Live!, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, and SNL’s “Weekend Update” – spanning a timeline of eight events during the pandemic.

RQ1: What Strategies Did Late-Night Hosts Use to Explain Complex News Events During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Late-night hosts employed seven journalistic strategies that I grouped into three over-arching themes: building credibility, exercising news judgement, and defining and explaining. The strategies that journalists already use are as follows:

- **Building credibility**
  - Interviewing experts
  - Contextualizing and fact-checking misinformation
  - Citing news outlets and official sources

- **Exercising news judgement**
  - Ordering stories by importance
  - Including international news stories

- **Defining and explaining**
  - Defining new terms
  - Breaking down complex topics
I grouped the seven non-journalistic strategies into three common themes: using humor for emphasis, making a personal connection with the audience, and embracing subjectivity instead of objectivity. The strategies that journalists don’t (or tend not to) use are as follows:

- Using humor for emphasis
  - Contrasting humor with seriousness
  - Making comparisons between real scenarios and fake ones
  - Rebranding the show or segments
- Creating a personal connection with the audience
  - Making a personal appeal
  - Evoking a “we’re all in this together” mentality
- Embracing subjectivity over objectivity
  - Acknowledging confusion or fear
  - Stressing caution over panic

**Journalistic Strategies**

**Building credibility.** As traditional journalists themselves would do, late-night hosts used expert interviews, fact-checking, and citing other sources as a way to build their credibility and report the news.

**Interviewing Experts.** Although late-night shows are known for interviewing celebrity guests, the pandemic offered a unique opportunity for hosts to interview expert guests about COVID-19. However, the content of the interviews were different than one might see on a newscast, as hosts often asked more basic questions of their guests, treating the interview as sort of a frequently asked questions portion of the show. From
expert guests like Dr. Anthony Fauci to “expert guests played by other cast members of the show, these segments were informative and helped to reiterate safety precautions and facts about the virus in a new format and coming from a known, trusted primary source.

As mentioned in the previous section, Dr. Fauci appeared on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on the March 12, 2021 episode entitled “The Late Show Quaranniversary Special.” During the interview Colbert asked his guest factual questions, such as why the vaccine became available to the general public sooner than expected, but he also asked more subjective questions:

Now for a year now, you’ve been advising us what to do. Can you advise us how to feel? Because, I mean, there’s a change in the air… there’s a sense of hope out there, and we don’t want to get burned. Can we be hopeful?

Other expert guests appeared on these late-night shows during this time. Noah interviewed the former U.S. Surgeon General and repeated the phrase “What do you think people are missing?” twice within the interview. On March 11, 2020, Noah host New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, asking him about the city’s response to COVID-19. Colbert also hosted Professor, Physician, and Medical Correspondent Dr. Jon LaPook in a similar capacity on the October 2, 2020 episode of the show to talk about Trump testing positive for COVID-19. During the segment Colbert asks basic questions, like “What do we know about the severity of his condition?” and “What is a low-grade fever?”

Oliver and Bee’s shows relied less heavily on expert guests to explain news events, but “Weekend Update” employed this strategy in a different way by having “expert” guests on the show that were merely fictional characters played by a member of the cast. A good example of this is when during the December 12, 2020 episode of the show when Kate McKinnon joins the segment as Dr. Wayne Wenowdis, the show’s resident medical expert. Colin Jost asks McKinnon’s character questions on behalf of the
great public saying, “We’re so glad you’re here because people are really excited about
the vaccine, but they also have a lot of questions about it.” Jost asks yes or no questions
about the Pfizer vaccine’s effectiveness, side effects, and availability to which McKinnon
responds, “We know this.”

Even when it came to celebrity guests, hosts often asked what they were doing
during the pandemic and if they were staying safe to reinforce pandemic safety
precautions. Sometimes in lieu of an expert or celebrity guest, a host would interview one
of his or her own members of the show via video call. During Kimmel’s March 19, 2020
“minilogue” episode, the host calls Guillermo Rodriguez and asks what he’s been doing
during isolation, chastising him when Rodriguez says he's been going to 7-Eleven.

Whether done jokingly or not, this is yet another feature that late-night shows
share with traditional news outlets and a way that the hosts themselves act as journalists.
By speaking to expert sources and talking about issues of the pandemic that may have a
lot of confusion surrounding them, these guests serve as a tool for the hosts to relay the
facts about COVID-19 to their audiences through a trusted source.

Contextualizing and Fact-Checking Misinformation. Although the shows did
not dwell for too long on every instance of misinformation surrounding the pandemic,
several shows did notably talk about misinformation and even showing clips of someone,
often President Trump, saying or tweeting something that was untrue. While journalists
tend to shy away from repeating misinformation, these late-night shows did effectively
contextualize the shows so that viewers would not mistakenly think that the false
information was true. On March 15, 2020, Oliver gave a call to action imploring viewers
to help stop the spread of the virus as well as misinformation. Oliver then gives examples
of commentators who’ve made false claims about COVID-19, bookending the statements with obvious indicators that the information is false, such as calling it “harmful bullshit.”

Noah included a segment called “Heroes of the Pandumbic” during the April 6, 2020 episode of the show. Throughout the montage of different commentators making false claims about the pandemic, it was very visually and audibly obvious that the statements were false as dramatic music played in the background and a banner at the bottom of the screen displayed two medallions on the left and right saying, “Heroes of the Pandumbic.”

Besides being fodder for jokes, misinformation during the pandemic was so common that it was almost unavoidable. Acknowledging incorrect statements helped the hosts to refute and fact-check misinformation directly.

*Citing News Outlets and Official Sources.* Although often in the context of sarcasm, these six late-night shows incorporated visual aspects that made their shows appear more “newsy” or representative of a traditional broadcast news show, such as through the use of chyrons at the bottom of the screen and COVID-related imagery. Perhaps the most important feature is that many of the episodes visually cited their sources, showing pictures of news clippings, screenshotted tweets from sources or reporters, and video clips of news broadcasts. A very journalism-oriented example of this would be when Kimmel traced Trump’s close contacts after he tested positive. During this segment of the October 2, 2020 show, Kimmel walked the audience through the contacts with a series of photos taken from the events leading up to Trump’s announcement. Bee, Colbert, Noah, and Oliver heavily relied on clips from news broadcasts and clippings from traditional written news outlets as they were explaining news events as well. By emulating a newscast, the hosts added credibility to the news.
they were talking about and provided viewers with another place to look for more detail about a specific story. This strategy in effect creates a sort of roundup for viewers to see an overview of stories from different sources for the full picture of the details.

**Exercising News Judgement.** As a newspaper might decide what stories make the front page and a broadcast news show might decide which topics to talk about during longer segments, late-night hosts ordered their stories by importance and allotted the most time to significant stories relating to the pandemic, including news events from across the globe.

**Ordering Stories by Importance.** Much like how a newspaper would strategize the big story that goes on the front page of the print edition, the late-night shows often ordered their stories by importance or allotted the most time for the biggest stories. The hosts often acknowledged this by identifying a story as the biggest headline of the day, and the early pandemic provided plenty of opportunity to name a clear front page story. When the W.H.O. declared COVID-19 a pandemic, Noah said, “Normally, we would catch up on all of the headlines from around the world… But today, there's only one story the entire world is talking about: the Coronavirus.” And similarly, when it became public that Trump had contracted COVID-19, Noah said, “Obviously there’s only story that anyone in the world cares about right now.” Likewise, Oliver opened his October 4, 2020 show by mentioning all of the stories that he can’t talk about and saying: “But obviously, the biggest news of the week came early Friday morning when Trump revealed that he and Melania had tested positive for the Coronavirus. It was news that felt both shocking and utterly inevitable.”
**Including International News Stories.** Because COVID-19 was an international story even before it became a domestic one in the U.S., many shows talked about what was happening across the world, whether stories of sadness or hope. In the episode that aired on March 29, 2020, Oliver reviewed some of the international headlines as “COVID-19 continues to rip around the globe.” Bee does a similar thing in her March 11, 2020 episode, discussing the current state of China, Italy, and the U.S. On March 23, 2020, Noah provides some international comedic relief, showing a series of clips that went viral around that time of Italian mayors threatening their constituents to stay inside. This comparison to other countries serves to provide added context to the news happening in the U.S. and a bigger picture of the impact of the pandemic.

**Defining and Explaining.** During the pandemic, many new terms and concepts entered everyday life that would have to be explained by journalists. Late-night hosts also took part in this by defining new terms and attempting to break down the complex and confusing events of the pandemic.

**Defining New Terms.** With the pandemic, not only were there news events to explain but new terms as well, such as social distancing and flattening the curve. Oliver explained “social distancing” in his March 15, 2020 episode when going over COVID-19 safety precautions:

> Finally, stay home. Especially if you're sick, but also if you are not. That last one is part of what's called social distancing… social distancing is absolutely crucial. The idea is to avoid crowded places, cancel social engagements, avoid unnecessary travel, work from home if that is an option for you, and if you need to buy groceries or use public transit, try to do it at off peak times.

In a similar way, Colbert explains “flattening the curve” in his March 16, 2020 edition of the show and showed a visual of a graph to illustrate the concept.
Breaking Down Complex Topics. When the late-night hosts had to approach a complex topic, they simply broke it down into more manageable pieces. This strategy can actually be identified within other strategies already discussed, such as the expert interviews or comparisons. For example, when hosts asked basic questions of their expert guests, this was just another subtler way of breaking down a confusing topic into smaller pieces. However, the examples discussed here will be different because they deal with the times when hosts directly indicated that they were employing this strategy by acknowledging when something was confusing or difficult to understand. A significant example of this is in the episode of The Daily Show with Trevor Noah that aired on March 11, 2020. Noah started the show with the story that COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic and then transitioned into a simpler explanation with the phrase: “That’s a lot of information, so let’s try to break it all down.”

When the C.D.C. announced new mask-wearing guidelines on April 3, 2020, several of the shows responded by acknowledging their confusion surrounding the recommendation. In his episode that aired three days after the announcement, Noah said, “…that’s a major shift from the C.D.C., and it’s already having a big impact.” Acknowledging the complexity of issues was yet another way that hosts established their relatability, putting themselves in the place of the audience. Once acknowledged, breaking down these topics into concrete facts helped to create a chain of logic that was easy to follow.

Another crucial aspect of this strategy is acknowledging when something remains unknown. One example of this lies in Kate McKinnon’s bit for “Weekend Update” as Dr. Wayne Wenowdis during which she admitted that there are certain things we don’t know.
Embracing this uncertainty was distressing at times, but it also established a transparency between the host and the audience as they admitted to what was unknown instead of glossing over those questions to focus on what was known.

**Non-Journalistic Strategies**

While often cosplaying as journalists on traditional news broadcasts through the use of the journalistic strategies discussed above, late-night hosts also employed a set of strategies that are not often seen in the field of journalism, including rebranding their shows or segments, making calls to action, acknowledging confusion or fear, making comical comparisons between real and fake scenarios, evoking a “we’re all in this together” mentality, contrasting humor with seriousness, and stressing caution over panic.

While some of these strategies could be applied to publications and journalists themselves, others are unique to the world of late-night comedy. Whether applicable or not, these observations are still valuable examples of different and effective ways that someone can communicate the news.

**Using Humor for Emphasis.** As the hosts of late-night shows, the subjects of this study are first and foremost comedians. Therefore, many of the strategies they used to talk about the pandemic news involved humor or sometimes even a lack thereof.

**Contrasting Humor with Seriousness.** For shows and hosts known as being comedic, moments of seriousness were abundant when talking about COVID-19 and really stuck out in contrast to the usual tone of the shows. Noah, Colbert, and Oliver in particular became very earnest and solemn when talking about the pandemic and used that to their advantage, often ending in a call to action. Particularly when interviewing expert guests, Colbert and Noah’s demeanor changed from comedic to serious with a
noticeable lack of jokes during the interviews. Perhaps the exception would be Kimmel who still cracked a few jokes during his interview with Dr. Fauci and the hosts of “Weekend Update” who maintained their rapid-fire pacing with brief interludes of seriousness that still usually ended in a joke. But overall, hosts veered from the norm of joking to show that COVID-19 was no laughing matter (literally).

**Making Comparisons Between Real Scenarios and Fake Ones.** A common trope in late-night and comedy in general is the “that would be like” comparison where the speaker equates a real-life event to a fictional, fantastical scenario, exaggerating for comedic effect. Although usually out of proportion on purpose, this strategy does two things: it breaks down a topic and also points the audience’s attention to the significance of that topic. Kimmel does this on October 2, 2020 after Trump tests positive for COVID-19, equating the White House to a summer camp with an outbreak of lice. Although used jokingly, this comedic device is meant to express that something is out-of-the-ordinary and that it should be paid attention to.

Rebranding the Show or Segments. With the switch to at-home filming around March 20, 2020, many of the late-night shows rebranded in a sense, changing their titles or opening credits to adapt to the change. *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* became The Daily Social Distancing Show, incorporating a pandemic precaution into the show’s title that was repeated at the beginning of every remote show “because we're being responsible and we're staying at home to help contain the spread of Coronavirus,” Noah said. *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* was referred to as “A Late Show” by the host in his welcome and also changed in the show’s opening credits. Colbert explained this
change on the episode that aired March 12, 2021, a year after the W.H.O. had declared COVID-19 a pandemic:

Back in The Ed Sullivan Theater with the band and the audience, we called what we did *The Late Show.* But you may have noticed that the past year we've been calling it *A Late Show* because it's not exactly the show we used to do. It's a version of it. And I promise we'll get back to *The Late Show* just as soon as we can do it in a way that's *the* safe for my staff, crew, and audience.

As the show titles were modified, so were show intros. Kimmel’s opening sequence became a series of hand-drawn pictures with a child singing over them beginning with his March 18, 2020 “minilogue” from his home. With the switch to remote filming, Oliver’s show added a bottle of hand sanitizer to the theme song graphics. Additionally, Colbert and Noah both made note of the four-week point marking how long they and their audiences had been in isolation on their episodes that aired April 6, 2020.

All of the environments for the hosts changed with the switch to remote filming, and every host acknowledged this. While some chose their own homes as a new filming location, Samantha Bee began broadcasting from the woods: “I'm Samantha Bee, and I'm in the woods right now both metaphorically and literally. To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, I'm now shooting the show with a safe minimal crew of my husband and the creatures of the forest.” Similarly, Oliver’s ongoing bit while filming at home was that he was talking to the audience from a “white void” as he appeared in front of a blank background every show. Colbert, Kimmel, and Noah broadcast from various spots in their homes, and Colbert notably taped his first remote show from a bathtub in “A Special ‘Social Distancing’ Edition of the Late Show” on March 16, 2020.

With these changes, came the repeated explanations and reminders that the hosts wanted to keep everyone safe, including their crews and audiences. The repetition of the
acknowledgement of the pandemic and the lockdown specifically set an example for audiences to stay at home as well. These aspects contributed to the hosts’ relatability by showing they were stuck at home like everyone else, which often was not acknowledged or not the case for traditional journalists. The fact that their shows were rebranded or evolved in some way only served to reiterate just how important and impactful the COVID-19 pandemic was on daily life.

As COVID-19 began to permeate all parts of the shows from on-screen to behind-the-scenes, the hosts created new segments or rebranded existing ones to fit the theme of the pandemic. For example, in the episode of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* that aired on April 13, 2021 — the day that the C.D.C. recommended pausing the Johnson & Johnson vaccine — Kimmel portrayed a doctor in a segment called “Ask Dr. Jim” during which he answered questions about the safety of the vaccine.

In a service journalism-oriented spoof, Kimmel and Noah created “how to” segments for viewers. On April 6, 2020, Noah showed viewers to make a mask at home — or at least said he would. While the segment provided little useful advice and was purely for comedic effect, it provided a commentary on the difficulty in making your own mask and reiterates the necessity of having masks to wear. Similarly, on March 18, 2020, Kimmel hosted a segment on how viewers could celebrate St. Patrick’s Day at home.

As Colbert and Kimmel’s shows were only available to watch in YouTube clips. This short-form medium actually provided an added piece of content to analyze: video titles. As the episodes are divided into bite-size clips, these videos have specific titles to encourage the viewer to click on them. When Colbert hosted Dr. Anthony Fauci on the March 12, 2021 episode, the two clips of his interview were entitled: “Doctor’s Orders:
Dr. Fauci Says Don't Go Hit The Clubs, Even After Being Vaccinated” and “Which Does Dr. Fauci Prefer: The Pfizer, Moderna, Or Johnson & Johnson Vaccine?” Not only do these titles read as a sneak peek of what’s discussed in the interview, but they also serve as sort of a frequently asked questions section of the show as both these topics were sources of confusion during that time in the pandemic, which will be discussed further in the next section.

**Creating a Personal Connection with the Audience.** As late-night hosts attempted to navigate the pandemic, as it affected their daily lives and the lives of their audiences, they used strategies to build a rapport with their audience. By making personal appeals and evoking a sense of togetherness, they attempted to create personal connections that would make them more relatable.

**Making a Personal Appeal.** It was not uncommon for late-night hosts to end their shows or segments with a call to action, whether that be telling their audience to continue COVID-19 safety precautions or a more harrowing warning. For example, in his October 4 episode, Oliver talks about the close contacts that President Trump may have infected with COVID-19 and speaks directly to the audience saying:

> And there was something absolutely infuriating about watching them hugging each other when many in this country haven't seen their families for months or have died alone in a hospital. And it's not just that they're putting themselves at risk. More importantly, is that they're risking infecting others. The thing about a highly contagious virus is your recklessness could end up killing someone you never met, and they're still doing it.

Although Oliver is not directly asking the viewer to do anything, he is explaining why the situation is infuriating and giving a warning to all of those watching at home.

As their shows changed due to the pandemic, so did the way the hosts ended their shows. Whether telling their audiences to wash their hands, wear a mask, or stay inside,
pandemic-related vocabulary often replaced the traditional signoff. Noah began ending every show telling his audience to “Stay safe out there. Wash your hands,” and a third item that depended on the episode. Bee ended her March 11 episode with, “Be careful out there. Goodnight, everyone.” This repetition of precautions is just another way the hosts reminded their audience members of safety precautions and the threat of the pandemic.

_Evoking a “We’re All in this Together” Mentality._ After the W.H.O. declared COVID-19 a pandemic, every host began to use the collective “we” to group themselves with the audience and create this idea of a shared responsibility. While often used in the context of COVID-19 safety precautions, Oliver also employed this strategy when talking about the spread of misinformation relating to the pandemic in the March 15, 2020 episode of his show: “So please be careful before forwarding or retweeting stuff that you do not know to be true because our personal actions are really going to count here.” Similarly, when explaining the reason that her show had no audience, Bee said, “We didn’t want to be responsible for getting anyone sick.” On March 25, 2020, Bee used the repetition of “we need” to create a sense of empowerment.

In the switch to remote filming, many of the hosts acknowledged the inconvenience of staying at home, which increased their relatability by setting an honest example of what this daily-life-changing experience was like. In the first remote episode of _SNL_, Michael Che acknowledges that it’s a “strange” way to film and that they had people listening in on Zoom in lieu of an audience. This tactic not only creates a shared responsibility, but it also puts the hosts on the same level as the audience members.

_Embracing Subjectivity Over Objectivity._ While there is an ongoing conversation in the world of journalism about the ways in which the strict definition of
journalistic objectivity is problematic and exclusive, late-night hosts serve as an example of how talking about the news can be subjective yet still effective. By acknowledging and guiding audiences through feelings of confusion, fear, caution, and panic, these late-night hosts further define their roles as not just news disseminators but also advisors.

**Acknowledging Confusion or Fear.** Another way hosts related to their audiences was by being honest about the situation. Instead of taking on a demeanor of “it’s all going to be ok,” the hosts spoke frankly about the confusion and fear that the pandemic was creating, using words that acknowledged the fear and emotion of the time, whether positive or otherwise. On March 15, 2020, Oliver said, “I know that this disruption to your life is annoying. And it’s okay to be disappointed or even irritated.” The host followed this with a bit where he put 30 seconds on the clock for him and his audience to vent about the things they would miss because of the pandemic.

All except one show — *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, which did not have an episode air until 19 days after the event — responded to Trump contracting COVID-19 and made it the first and biggest story of the show. This may be because of the context of the event and the nature of the shows studied, as all are considered left-leaning and the hosts are often critical of Trump. Aside from the placement of the story, the hosts used emotion-evoking and honest language to express their shock. On October 4, 2020, Oliver said the news was “Both shocking and utterly inevitable” and that “Obviously the president having Coronavirus is a very big deal.” A phrase repeated across the seven episodes responding to this event was that the news was not funny but serious, accompanied by a collective hope that the president and first lady would recover, highlighting the seriousness of the news and the virus.
Stressing Caution Over Panic. One of the most striking themes that I found in how the shows talked about COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic was the way that the hosts often tried to create a balance between instilling an urgent need to take precaution in their viewers and avoiding an all-consuming panic. In episode the October 4, 2020 episode of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, Oliver discussed fearmongering and the role of fear in the pandemic, saying it’s not necessarily a bad thing.

It's what stops you from chopping your hand off with a meat cleaver or petting an angry dog, crossing a busy street without looking. And this week, more than ever, proves that in the midst of a pandemic when you act without caution you cannot expect the virus to simply stand back and stand by.

What Oliver is talking about through the comparisons he’s making is essentially a healthy fear or caution, not an out-of-control fear that leads to panic. Similarly in Noah’s first episode after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, he urged the audience not to let panic takeover, which he used as a transition into talking about misinformation: “Because if you panic, you stop thinking clearly and if you’re not thinking clearly then you’ll start to believe anything that you hear. And there is a lot of bad information that is out there.”

RQ2: How Did the Hosts Use These Techniques to Frame COVID-19 as a Serious Issue?

Although the shows had similarities, each late-night hosts had different strategies that he or she relied on. Jimmy Kimmel Live!, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, and The Daily Show with Trevor Noah directly responded to six or more of the events and thus included more strategies, while the remaining three shows responded to three to five events in the timeline and thus included less strategies to analyze. In light of this, the findings below are organized by show, rather than by theme.
**Jimmy Kimmel Live!**

While Kimmel’s show responded to six out of the eight events in the timeline with a notable switch in tone between the first and second episodes. In his March 11, 2020 episode, he started with a segment called the “Five Stages of Coronavirus.” Although placing the pandemic as the top story of the day did highlight how important it was, the segment was more comedic than informational. As previously discussed, Kimmel used comparisons to illustrate his point and make a joke at the same time. When Trump contracted COVID-19, the host compared wearing a mask to having a parachute.

**The Late Show with Stephen Colbert**

Over the course of the six episodes included in this analysis from Colbert’s show, the host put away the jokes to interview two expert guests, Dr. LaPook and Dr. Fauci. In his coverage of Trump’s diagnosis on October 2, 2020, Colbert’s repetition of the word “unusual” highlights the shock of the event: “This, this is a very unusual episode of the show because, well, this is a very unusual day.” Overall Colbert’s ability to frame the COVID-19 as serious, came from his own seriousness with which he approached the topic.

**The Daily Show with Trevor Noah**

As the only show that responded to all eight events in the timeline, Noah provided a plethora of strategies to code for, most notably his inclusion of expert guests, citing sources, hopefulness and emotion-evoking language, and his seriousness when talking about certain topics relating to the virus. On the show he consistently made use of showing visuals of news clipping and broadcast clips to cite his sources or react to an event. The show by nature has a somewhat newsy format, from its title to the use of
chyrons, which helped Noah to transition from comedic host to pandemic reporter. In his October 5, 2020 episode of the show, when talking about Trump’s diagnosis, the chyron at the bottom of the screen reads, “White House offers mixed messages,” acknowledging the confusion of the situation.

*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*

The schedule and format of Bee’s show did not lend itself as readily to this research design. In total, only two of her episodes responded to three events in the timeline. However, in her first episode, she did effectively cover the testing shortage, pandemic misinformation, panic-buying, and other major COVID-related news, using strategies like looking to international stories, citing news sources, and grouping herself with the audience.

*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*

Oliver’s show came in fourth in terms of the most episodes responding to the events and thus included in the analysis. The format of the host’s show was that he would spend time in the beginning discussing major headlines before turning to the story that he would spend the rest of the show exploring. Oliver stood out from the other hosts as someone who used personal appeals, not just in passing to remind viewers to wash their hands, but as grave reminders of the effect of the pandemic and the responsibility that everyone shared to stop the spread. Oliver did not rely on guests but on sources that he would string together to build a narrative around a story or persuade the audience of something. Essentially, he played the role of expert source on his show, exploring facts and giving his opinion at certain times during the show.
**SNL’s “Weekend Update”**

Like Bee’s show, this segment on SNL did not lend itself to this research method as readily as expected. Because of the irregularity of the season and how brief the segment is, this study analyzed three episodes relating to four events in the timeline: staying at home, mask-wearing, Trump’s diagnosis, and the approval of the first vaccine. Che and Jost's coverage of the vaccine through the “Dr. Wenowdis” segment previously discussed, was a significant example of how the show effectively framed the virus as a serious issue, while acknowledging the confusion that it had created in the news.

**Summary**

This study identified and coded for 14 strategies found across six different late-night shows ranging in frequency, format, and hosts. While some hosts utilized these strategies more often or more effectively than others, all of the shows succeeded at different points in framing the COVID-19 pandemic as a serious issue that required their audiences’ attention. From creating a sense of shared responsibility to renaming their shows entirely, these hosts played the role of news disseminators, thoroughly reporting stories and refuting misinformation throughout the first year of the pandemic in the U.S.
Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies that six late-night hosts used to frame COVID-19 during the early pandemic in the U.S. Although there is substantial research on the role of late-night shows as alternative news source, the pandemic offered a unique opportunity to study how the shows spoke to their audiences about a topic that had so much confusion, fear, and misinformation surrounding it. It is my hope that this study will fit into the larger field of news reporting by showing journalists a new perspective and set of tools.

Summary of Major Findings

Rewatching the late-night shows of the period from March 11, 2020 to April 13, 2021 was like looking into a time capsule of the early pandemic. As time moved on, the virus started to affect not only the content of the shows, but their physical surroundings as well. In the analysis of 28 episodes spanning 32 events, I identified 14 strategies that the hosts used to frame the pandemic that fell into two categories: journalistic and non-journalistic strategies. The journalistic strategies included interviewing experts, ordering stories by importance, defining new terms, contextualizing and fact-checking misinformation, citing news outlets and official sources, and breaking down complex topics. The non-journalistic strategies were rebranding the shows or special segments, making a personal appeal, acknowledging confusion or fear, making comparisons between real scenarios and fake ones, evoking a “we’re all in this together” mentality, contrasting humor with seriousness, and stressing caution over panic.
Theoretical Implications

Although the findings of this study cannot tell us for certain the decision-making process behind how or why hosts choose to frame a certain news event — the same way it cannot tell us what the audience consciously or subconsciously thinks about these choices — it does explore the narrative strategies that exist and are frequently employed by the hosts of these late-night shows. The findings of this study reinforce the importance of late-night shows as news sources and the hosts themselves as pseudo-journalists.

Adding to the literature, this study shows how hosts talked about a particular news event over a contained period. While there is existing literature about the overlap between journalism and late-night, this study delves into the role of these shows in health journalism, specifically in discussing COVID-19. Because the ongoing pandemic is a recent topic, this will fill a gap in the existing literature. Furthermore, it shows how six hosts employed narrative strategies, instead of looking at just one or two hosts as much of the literature does. This study identified 14 narrative strategies that can serve as a building block for future research into this area.

Practical Implications

On the most basic level, this study reinforces the idea that news comes in many forms. Whether a traditional news outlet or an alternative news source, such as late-night, journalism and journalists will always benefit in learning more about how other fields talk about the news. This study shows how and to what extent the hosts of these shows talked about major news events during the first year or so of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the very least, this research serves to uphold previous literature establishing late-night shows as news sources, and I hope it can provide inspiration for viewers and journalists,
particularly health journalists, to watch these shows critically through a new lens. My hope is that researchers and practitioners in the field of journalism might see this research as yet another example and exploration of the similarities of journalism and infotainment, reviewing the framing strategies discussed as tools that might be applied to in the field of journalism.

As these shows reacted to the confusing and often frightening news of the early pandemic, they took on the roles of news broadcasters in a sense, perhaps more than they ever have before, and they did so effectively. The ultimate goal of this research was to provide a toolkit for journalists of strategies that may or may not apply to their own work, but might allow them to think critically and creatively about the way they tell stories, particularly health stories. This is just a small piece of the broader topic of news coverage during COVID-19, but I hope that it can serve to show us some of the things that were done right to frame the pandemic as a serious and oftentimes alarming issue.

A major goal of this study was to identify strategies that late-night hosts used during the pandemic that could also be employed by journalists in future reporting. While certain non-journalistic strategies may not be applicable to the field of journalism, such as contrasting humor with seriousness or making comical comparisons between real scenarios and fakes ones, the five other non-journalistic strategies could easily be applied by publications or individual journalists. Although the concept of rebranding an existing show or segment may not be appropriate for every news story, this strategy did serve to indicate the impact of COVID-19 – that it had changed everything from our daily lives to the shows we watched every night. Although the initial shock may have passed, the pandemic remains ongoing and therefore pertinent to everyone’s lives and the daily news
cycle. Therefore, this strategy could still serve journalists and publications as a tool for highlighting the importance of pandemic-related news or other stories in a recurring format.

The remaining four non-journalistic strategies – making calls to action, acknowledging confusion or fear, evoking a “we’re all in this together” mentality, and stressing caution over panic – are not often used in journalism because they go against the traditional definition of journalistic objectivity. While the argument to eschew this increasingly problematic and outdated facade of strict objectivity in journalism is a separate conversation entirely, these strategies could serve as yet another way for journalists to represent their own beliefs and to advocate for the safety of their audiences, especially when it comes to topics of health and science. In particular, acknowledging when news is confusing, scary, or even contradictory will not only better inform news readers/watchers, but also build audience trust by providing the full picture of a topic. Additionally, creating a sense of togetherness by using words like “we,” “us,” and “our” blurs the line between journalist and news consumer. Again, this may not be a strategy for daily news stories but could be a tool for creating a sense of collective responsibility when it comes to ongoing stories, such as the effects of climate change. Likewise, as experts in the topic they’re reporting on, journalists should have the authority to call news readers/watchers to action when appropriate. Lastly, the theme of stressing caution over panic was ever-present and important during the news cycle of the pandemic. Like several of the other non-journalistic strategies discussed above, journalists should not be afraid to speak directly to their audiences (with the help of expert sources), especially in matters of health and safety.
**Limitations**

One limitation was the inconsistency in when and how the different late-night shows in this study addressed the news event in question. Some of these shows run five days a week, while others just once a week, so the dates varied and there was often overlap in the content of episodes. Additionally, shows that air episodes more frequently seemed to be more likely to address daily news stories. Shows that aired too far from an event seemed less likely to discuss the topic. I addressed this through the color-coded table found in the previous section.

Ultimately, the timeline structure of the study had its benefits and drawbacks. While it created a way of pulling a sample from the early pandemic that was a significant yet manageable workload, the shows episodes had to be identified through trial and error, which meant a lot of time was spent watching and transcribing shows that were not actually included in the study. Besides the weekly schedule of a show, it was possible that episodes that aired the same day as the event may not have time to restructure their show to include it, so I frequently had to watch the episode after and sometimes even before as well to be sure that it was not addressed. As a result of this challenge, whether or not a show addressed the event in question practically became a factor itself in the analysis. It may have been more effective to look at shows within a certain date range to see their progression, but that also might have required narrowing down the selection of shows to maintain a sustainable study. While the timeline did prove effective, using only the C.D.C.’s timeline of events as a source left out some of the bigger cultural moments that were present across several of the shows, such as when all the shows transitioned to remote filming. Future researchers might consider looking at not only events, but also at
big news stories or controversies that had to do with pandemic, such as misinformation surrounding the vaccine, health care workers’ need for medical supplies, and the testing shortage.

In addition to the timing of the shows, the format also played a role in the analysis. The more daily-skewed shows – Jimmy Kimmel Live!, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, and The Daily Show with Trevor Noah – were more likely to discuss the identified events and thus provided more content to be analyzed. The “Weekend Update” segment of SNL because of its length as a smaller segment in a larger show and the irregularity of the season’s episodes, only allowed for three episodes to be included in the analysis. Similarly, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee had less relevant content as well, resulting in only two episodes relating to three events being included in the analysis.

In addition to the format, it is important to also consider the role of the show. Kimmel and Colbert’s more traditional shows tended to discuss major news events in the opening monologue followed by celebrity guest interviews. However, the four remaining shows typically devoted most of their show to discussing the news, with Full Frontal with Samantha Bee and Last Week Tonight with John Oliver showcasing a more longform-style deep dive into a specific issue. In contrast, The Daily Show with Trevor Noah and “Weekend Update” often cover multiple headlines from the day or week.

Another unexpected obstacle was that two of the shows in this study, Jimmy Kimmel Live! and The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, were not readily available on any streaming platforms in their full episode format. Therefore, the episodes were pieced together by scrolling back chronologically through the shows’ YouTube channels and creating separate playlists. I found a list of episodes for Colbert’s show on Amazon Prime
Video and a list of Kimmel’s on IMDB. However, an unexpected challenge arose when I realized that YouTube clips are not necessarily posted on the day the episode originally aired or the day after, with the exception of the host’s opening monologue. Additionally, the number of YouTube clips per show varied, with Kimmel’s showing ranging from 3-5 YouTube clips per episode and Colbert ranging anywhere from 5-10 YouTube videos per episode. This was a rather tedious process that I undertook because all other resources were exhausted and certainly added an unexpected obstacle to this research.

Besides the lack of consistency in only studying two shows via YouTube, there is another limitation in terms of added context. If I had known this would come up, I might have planned to watch all of the shows on YouTube to increase consistency, despite the extra time it took to prepare. Purely anecdotally, I believe people are more likely to watch a YouTube clip of a late-night show here and there rather than seek out the full episodes on their own. To study the show in the medium that it is most often viewed could only provide further validity to the study. Additionally, packaging clips of episodes for YouTube provides an added feature that is not available in the full episodes, separate video titles. In order to catch the readers’ attention, these clips have eye-catching titles that I believe, especially in the case of COVID-19, would garner more viewership on social media and serve as an added strategy for framing the pandemic. Additionally, because of the logistical challenges of the pandemic for the hosts, YouTube served as a platform for extra content that did not air on television.

**Directions for Future Research**

The pandemic is still ongoing and as such this research is incomplete. Although the news about COVID-19 has become more commonplace and perhaps less dramatic in
recent months, both the fields of late-night comedy and health journalism could benefit from further chronological research into how late-night shows have continued to talk about the pandemic. Although comparing a variety of shows proved valuable, future researchers should consider not only the frequency of the shows they wish to study, but also the role and format of the show, as stated in the previous section. However, it would also be valuable to narrow down a study to one show and watch a whole year’s worth of content to analyze the evolution of the show throughout the pandemic.

As time goes on, there would certainly be a need for research in new areas, such as elections and international conflict, and the method and framework of this study could perhaps be applied to a different period and shows entirely. Most importantly, I have established a list of 14 narrative strategies that I found through this study that could be applied, built upon, and edited for future use in another study with the eventual hope that they can be applied to the field of journalism. Besides building upon these strategies, it would be useful to create a study that compares the strategies of late-night shows to those of publications known for advocacy and service journalism, particularly in the field of health journalism, because these narrative strategies are not necessarily generalizable to all types of journalists, as they can be tools of persuasion, which is sometimes but not always in the journalist’s responsibility. This would help to bridge the gap between this theoretical study and a practical study that implements these strategies into the field of journalism itself. A study into the practical applications of these narrative strategies in the field of health journalism could prove very useful. Returning to the premise of this study that late-night hosts are able to capture and persuade an audience that needs to be
informed, this future research would be the next step in bettering the strategies of journalists.

Finally, as discussed in the previous section, this research does not explore the perspective of the late-night hosts or the reactions of the audiences. The first may be virtually impossible because of issues of access, but regardless the latter is much more significant to this field. A new audience study on how late-night audiences reacted to coverage of COVID-19 specifically could complement this research by providing a full-picture view of the effects of the narrative strategies discussed.

**Conclusion**

Late-night shows have long talked about the news and thus served as an alternative news source. Whether purposeful or otherwise, these medium shares many similarities with the field of journalism and the hosts themselves with journalists. In citing sources, interviewing expert guests, and many more strategies, these shows are able to inform and engage audiences about the news. During the struggle and confusion of the early pandemic, these shows served as not only comedic relief but informative reprieve. Through plain language and relatability, late-night hosts framed COVID-19 as a serious issue during which everyone must do their part.

While this study was not a comparison of traditional journalism to late-night news, it was a critical look at what the late-night comedy world did right and how. As journalists can benefit from the storytelling and engagement strategies of any source of alternative news, late-night should not be discounted just because their hosts are professional comedians. The hosts and their writers are not only comedians, but skilled communicators and informed citizens. During a time when misinformation ran rampant
and nothing seemed clear, they persevered in explaining often unexplainable news. It is my hope that this study can be a building block to not only engage journalists, but to also help them engage new audiences.
References


Hersey, C. W. (2013). Nothing but the truthiness: A history of television news parody and its entry into the journalistic field [Doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University]. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_diss/46


Appendix A

This is the list of episodes analyzed and discussed in this thesis organized by show. Please note that full episodes of Jimmy Kimmel Live! and The Late Show with Stephen Colbert from this period of time were not available on a streaming service, so I pieced the episodes together with YouTube clips cross-referencing their YouTube channel archives with episode lists found on Amazon Prime Video and IMDB.

Jimmy Kimmel Live!
Episode: Season 18, Episode 25
Platform: YouTube
Title: The 5 Stages of Coronavirus
Title: David Spade on The Bachelor, Feud with Eddie Murphy & Being Mistaken for a Lady
Title: Eiza González on Football, Falling in Love with a Stripper & Bloodshot
Air date: March 11, 2020

Episode: Season 18, Episodes 27-29
Platform: YouTube
Title: Jimmy Kimmel’s Quarantine Minilogue - Home with Kids, Trump, Tom Brady & St. Patrick’s Day
Title: Jimmy Kimmel’s Quarantine Minilogue – Staying Normal, Guillermo’s Snacks & Trump’s “Chinese Virus”
Title: Jimmy Kimmel’s Quarantine Minilogue – Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Dumb Spring Breakers & Mislede Trump
Air date: March 18-20, 2020

Episode: Season 18, Episode 41
Platform: YouTube
Title: Jimmy Kimmel’s Quarantine Monologue – Week 4 of Isolation with Lady Gaga!
Title: Jimmy & His Kids Play “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”
Title: Kaley Cuoco on Moving in with Husband and Their Many Dogs & Mugs
Air date: April 6, 2020

Episode: Season 19, Episode 10
Platform: YouTube
Title: Jimmy Kimmel on Trump's COVID-19 Diagnosis
Title: Jimmy Kimmel Stars in Air Bud Spinoff
Title: ESPN’s Rachel Nichols on NBA Bubble & Jimmy Butler’s $20 Coffee
Title: How Shaq Would Have Busted Out of the NBA Bubble
Title: Jimmy Kimmel Prank Calls His Aunt Chippy
Air date: October 2, 2020
Episode: Season 19, Episode 94
Platform: YouTube
Title: Jimmy Kimmel Live’s One Year Lockdown Coronaversary Spectacular
Title: Joel McHale is the Busiest Man in Hollywood During Quarantine
Title: Pete Buttigieg on Becoming Transportation Secretary & Doing Away With Daylight Saving Time!
Air date: March 11, 2021

Episode: Season 19, Episode 108
Platform: YouTube
Title: MyPillow Mike’s Amazon Rival, Jimmy Gets Vaccinated and Johnson & Johnson Paused
Title: John Stamos on Being an Ugly Baby, His Son Billy & New Show Big Shot
Title: John Stamos & Guillermo Spent Quarantine Together
Title: Katheryn Winnick on Playing Ivana Trump, Her Crazy Fans & ABC’s Big Sky
Air date: April 13, 2021

The Late Show with Stephen Colbert
Episode: n/a
Platform: YouTube
Title: The Big Story Tonight Is YOU – A Special “Social Distancing” Edition Of The Late Show
Air date: March 16, 2020

Episode: Season 5, Episode 109
Platform: YouTube
Title: Social Distancing Rules Left To The States While Trump Refuses To Issue National Stay-At-Home Ord…
Title: Lady Gaga Interrupts Stephen Colbert's Monologue To Announce The "One World: Together At Home" Ev…
Title: Chance The Rapper: My Grandma Sends Me Instagram Memes All Day
Title: Chance The Rapper: Some Things Can Be For The Benefit Of Your Spirit
Title: This Year, Consider Praying From Home
Air date: April 6, 2020

Episode: Season 6, Episode 13
Platform: YouTube
Title: A Very Unusual Friday And A Very Unexpected Friday Late Show
Title: "A Potential Teaching Moment" - Dr. LaPook Reacts To President Trump's Covid-19 Diagnosis
Title: Should The President Attend The Next Debate? Dr. Jon LaPook Offers A Medical Perspective
Title: John Dickerson Believes Hearings For Trump's Supreme Court Pick Will Proceed Without Delay

57
Title: John Dickerson On What's Next For The Trump And Biden Presidential Campaigns
Air date: October 2, 2020

Episode: Season 6, Episode 54
Platform: YouTube
Title: The Election Is Finally Over: SCOTUS Rejects GOP Suit, Biden's Win Certified By Electoral College
Title: Chance The Rapper's Favorite Song Off His New Christmas Album Is "Who's To Say"
Title: Mister Softee Has The Vaccine Distribution Market Cornered
Title: Chance The Rapper Reacts To Dionne Warwick's Twitter Shout Out
Title: Christopher Walken Recounts How He Ended Up With Muhammad Ali's Boxing Trunks
Title: Melania Trump Drops Hints About Her Post-White House Plans
Air date: December 14, 2020

Episode: Season 6, Episode 99
Platform: YouTube
Title: The Year That Took 100 Years But Was Also Somehow Also One Long Day
Title: It's Been One Year Since I've Been Outside
Title: "Guaranteed, It Is Going To Happen" - Dr. Anthony Fauci On Getting Back To Normal
Title: Doctor's Orders: Dr. Fauci Says Don't Go Hit The Clubs, Even After Being Vaccinated
Title: "A Slate Show" With Stephen Colbert, Feat. Megan Thee Stallion, Tom Hanks And More
Title: Which Does Dr. Fauci Prefer: The Pfizer, Moderna, Or Johnson & Johnson Vaccine?
Air date: March 12, 2021

Episode: Season 6, Episode 113
Platform: YouTube
Title: Ecstasy, Girls, Cocaine And Champagne Awaited GOP Officials At Matt Gaetz's Sex Parties
Title: "Scary" - Maria Bakalova Describes Her Infamous Scene With Rudy Giuliani
Title: The Vax-Scene - Women 18-48 Are Already Quite Familiar With Drug Side Effects
Title: The Xupermask Is Here... Just In Time?
Title: "I Had A Lawyer's Number Written On My Leg" - Maria Bakalova On Sneaking Into The White House
Title: Mika or Joe? Willie Geist Answers With Which "Morning Joe" Co-Host He'd Rather Get High
Air date: April 14, 2021
The Daily Show with Trevor Noah
Episode: Season 25, Episode 74
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: Extended – March 11, 2020 – Bill de Blasio and David Burd
Air date: March 11, 2020

Episode: Season 25, Episode 76
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: March 23 – The Daily Social Distancing Show
Air date: March 23, 2020

Episode: Season 25, Episode 78
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: March 25, 2020 – Dr. Vivek Murthy
Air date: March 25, 2020

Episode: Season 25, Episode 84
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: April 6, 2020 – Jennifer Garner
Air date: April 6, 2020

Episode: Season 26, Episode 5
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: October 5, 2020 – Jason Momoa & Kat Graham
Air date: October 5, 2020

Episode: Season 26, Episode 40
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: December 14, 2020 – Pharrell Williams
Air date: December 14, 2020

Episode: Season 26, Episode 70
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: March 15, 2021 – Eddie Murphy
Air date: March 15, 2021

Episode: Season 26, Episode 82
Platform: Comedy Central
Title: April 13, 2021 – Katherine Maher & Travon Free
Air date: April 13, 2021
**Full Frontal with Samantha Bee**  
Episode: Season 11, Episode 12  
Platform: Amazon Prime Video  
Title: March 11, 2020  
Air date: March 11, 2020

Episode: Season 11, Episode 13  
Platform: Amazon Prime Video  
Title: March 25, 2020  
Air date: March 25, 2020

**Last Week Tonight with John Oliver**  
Episode: Season 7, Episode 5  
Platform: Amazon Prime Video  
Title: 15-Mar-20  
Air date: 3/15/20

Episode: Season 7, Episode 6  
Platform: Amazon Prime Video  
Title: 29-Mar-20  
Air date: 3/29/20

Episode: Season 7, Episode 25  
Platform: Amazon Prime Video  
Title: October 4, 2020  
Air date: 10/4/20

Episode: Season 8, Episode 5  
Platform: Amazon Prime Video  
Title: March 7, 2021: Unemployment  
Air date: 3/14/21

**SNL’s “Weekend Update”**  
Episode: Season 45, Episode 16  
Platform: Hulu  
Title: Saturday Night Live at Home  
Air date: April 11, 2020

Episode: Season 46, Episode 1  
Platform: Hulu  
Title: Chris Rock  
Air date: 10/3/20
Episode: Season 46, Episode 8
Platform: Hulu
Title: Timothée Chalamet
Air date: 12/12/20
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing Experts</td>
<td>Inviting public officials and medical experts on the show</td>
<td>Stephen Colbert interviewed Dr. Anthony Fauci on his show on March 12, 2021, asking him questions like, “Can we be hopeful?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking basic, common questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordering Stories by Importance</td>
<td>Spotlighting major COVID-19 news at the beginning of the episode</td>
<td>John Oliver opened his October 4, 2020 show with the “biggest news of the week”: President Trump testing positive for COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allotting the most time for the biggest story of the episode</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining New Terms</td>
<td>Defining COVID-related terminology, like “social distancing”</td>
<td>John Oliver explained the concept of “social distancing” and its importance during his March 15, 2020 show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including International News</td>
<td>Comparing what is happening in the U.S. with how other countries are handling/experiencing the pandemic</td>
<td>During her March 11, 2020 show, Samantha Bee discussed the state of the pandemic in China, Italy, and the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualizing and Fact-</td>
<td>Repeating misinformation but with audio and visual cues</td>
<td>Trevor Noah’s show had a segment called “Heroes of the Pandumbic” on April 6, 2020. The segment was a montage of commentators making false claims about the virus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking Misinformation</td>
<td>signifying the information is false</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Citing News Outlets and</td>
<td>Showing screenshots of news stories from traditional media outlets</td>
<td>During his October 2, 2020 episode, Kimmel walked the audience through the people Trump was in contact with before it became publicly known that he had tested positive. He used a series of photos to guide the contact tracing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Sources</td>
<td>Showing clips from news broadcasts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Showing photos taken of events</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Breaking Down Complex</td>
<td>Introducing a news story then backtracking to explain the smaller pieces of the concept/event</td>
<td>On March 11, 2020, Noah explained that COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic, transitioning to an explanation with the phrase: “That’s a lot of information, so let’s try to break it all down.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>Saying some variation of the phrase “let’s break it down”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebranding the Show or</td>
<td>Rewriting shows or segment titles to incorporate COVID-19 terminology</td>
<td>Noah’s “The Daily Show” was renamed “The Daily Social Distancing Show” for the episodes where the host was filming at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a Personal Appeal</td>
<td>Speaking directly to the audience</td>
<td>On March 11, 2020, Bee ended her show with the phrase: “Be careful out there. Goodnight, everyone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encouraging or pleading with the audience to follow pandemic safety precautions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledging Confusion or Fear</td>
<td>Acknowledging that new information conflicts with old information Using emotion-evoking, descriptive words, like “scary” “I know that this disruption to your life is annoying,” Oliver said on March 15, 2020. “And it’s okay to be disappointed or even irritated.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making Comparisons Between Real and Fictional Scenarios</td>
<td>Using a variation of the phrase “that would be like…” to illustrate a fantastical scenario that underlines the significance of the real life event Kimmel compared the White House to a lice-infested summer camp during his episode on October 2, 2020.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evoking a “We’re All in This Together” Mentality</td>
<td>Using words like “us” and “we” Speaking directly to the audience Creating a sense of collective responsibility On March 15, 2020, Oliver said that “our personal actions are really going to count here.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contrasting humor with seriousness</td>
<td>Making less jokes Not smiling Looking focused and concerned Colbert was notably solemn during his interview with Dr. Fauci on March 12, 2021.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stressing Caution Over Panic</td>
<td>Advising audiences to take necessary precautions without giving in to panic or fear During his March 11, 2020 episode, Noah urged his audience not to panic: “Because if you panic, you stop thinking clearly and if you're not thinking clearly then you’ll start to believe anything that you hear.”</td>
<td></td>
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