



## **A year of misinformation on Sinclair's morning show The National Desk**

Zachary Pleat

January 19, 2022

The conservative local TV giant Sinclair Broadcast Group launched *The National Desk* on January 18, 2021, promising that it would “provide audiences with commentary-free news coverage from both a local and national perspective.” Instead, local TV audiences are regularly exposed to conservative misinformation from right-wing pundits, Republican-aligned industry front groups, and even a representative of an anti-immigration hate group. Media Matters has gathered together examples from this program over the past year.

The show also re-airs Sinclair’s national content, including segments from anti-vaccine activist Sharyl Attkisson’s weekly *Full Measure* program and prerecorded news segments from Sinclair national correspondents that aired earlier on Sinclair-owned or -operated TV stations. The morning edition of the program expanded to a separate nighttime edition in September.

*The National Desk* launched with COVID-19 misinformation during its very first episode, and it has gotten worse since. The show has repeatedly aired misinformation on COVID-19 and promoted opponents of vaccination over the past year. The program also regularly turned to former Trump immigration official Mark Morgan for commentary, even after Morgan began working for the Federation for American Immigration Reform -- a nativist anti-immigrant organization that the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated as a hate group.

Conservative misinformation about the economy and congressional legislation to improve it are also common subjects on the program, often pushed by conservative industry front groups such as the Job Creators Network. *The National Desk* has also been a friendly home for right-wing activists who oppose teaching children about racism and its history in the United States, and who frequently claim just about everything related to race in K-12 education is “critical race theory,” which in reality is a legal theory only taught in graduate school. The program has also interviewed Republican lawmakers who aided former President Donald Trump in his effort to steal the 2020 presidential election and allowed other Republican lawmakers to lie about efforts to protect voting rights as the GOP passes laws that restrict voting in multiple states.

Below is a list of segments, narratives, and comments from *The National Desk*’s anchor, reporters, and guests that exemplify the kind of misinformation broadcast to dozens of Sinclair stations around the country for three hours every weekday.

## COVID-19: From misinforming about mitigation measures to hyping vaccination opponents

- During the premiere episode of *The National Desk* on January 18, 2021, anchor Jan Jeffcoat and her guest, Dr. Jeffrey Singer of the Cato Institute, falsely suggested that lockdowns are ineffective in slowing the spread of COVID-19. Lockdowns work to break the chain of transmission and reduce the probability of infection.
- Later in January, Jeffcoat twice repeated this false assertion that lockdowns didn't work, but this time her guests rebutted her misinformation.
- In mid-June, Jeffcoat allowed Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) to push debunked COVID-19 treatments hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin as "potentially life-saving drugs."
- During two appearances in July, Singer spread skepticism around vaccinating children against COVID-19 and criticized mask mandates as the delta variant surged throughout the country.
- On August 20, Singer downplayed the COVID-19 fatality rate while discussing booster shots. (The fatality rate among those with confirmed COVID-19 infections in the U.S. was actually four to five times higher than what Singer claimed at the time.)
- In September, Singer twice pushed the false claim that surviving a COVID-19 infection could provide better immunity than vaccination. Later, he attacked Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for approving booster shots for front-line workers.
- In October, *The National Desk* started a pattern of airing softball interviews and segments with people and lobbying organizations that oppose COVID-19 vaccine mandates. One Sinclair national segment which aired on the program falsely blamed workplace vaccine requirements for flight cancellations.
- Interviews with lobbyists and Republican officials opposed to the vaccine requirements continued in November, which also saw *National Desk* correspondent Angela Brown quote a student likening one university's COVID-19 testing requirements to a surveillance state.
- In December, the program promoted an anti-vaccine lawsuit from a major conservative political organization.
- On Christmas Eve, Singer said a 27% surge in COVID-19 cases as a result of the omicron variant spreading "might turn out to be a really good thing and good news."
- On January 7, 2022, conservative economist Stephen Moore criticized some schools' decision to temporarily close amid raging COVID-19 infections. He mentioned only the dangers to children of falling behind academically while ignoring the soaring rate of child hospitalizations due to the omicron variant.
- On January 11, 2022, Jeffcoat aired a misleading clip to claim CDC Director Walensky admitted "most COVID deaths were linked to preexisting health factors." In fact,

Walensky was discussing a CDC study of 1.2 million people who were vaccinated and a death rate of 0.003% of those people, and saying that “the overwhelming number” of deaths in vaccinated people “occurred in people who had at least four comorbidities.” The full context of Walensky’s comment was published a day before Jeffcoat aired the misleading clip.

### **Immigration: Relying on a hate group representative for commentary**

- During its early weeks, the program started a pattern of interviewing or citing Mark Morgan -- a former Trump immigration official -- in its coverage of immigration. The interviews and citations continued even after Morgan joined the extremist anti-immigrant group Federation for American Immigration Reform, which the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated as a hate group due to its leaders’ ties to white supremacists and their own racist statements opposing immigration.
- *The National Desk* continued to allow Morgan to lie about immigration policy in several February appearances.
- In August, Morgan used his *National Desk* appearances to stoke fear that migrants are spreading COVID-19 throughout the U.S. (Fact-checkers determined that migrants aren’t responsible for the widespread infections.)
- In mid-September, he also falsely claimed that migrants aren’t being tested for COVID-19 before being released, a lie he repeated in a mid-December appearance on the program.
- Also in August, Morgan used the program to repeatedly fearmonger that Afghan refugees evacuated by the U.S. military may be terrorists. Morgan first did this just a day after *The National Desk* celebrated the successful evacuation of Afghan ally Mohammad Khalid Wardak, a national police officer who spent years working alongside U.S. forces.
- In October, Morgan attacked the Department of Homeland Security for prioritizing the arrest and removal of undocumented immigrants who are national security threats and declaring that entering the U.S. without authorization is no longer an arrestable offense.
- On December 7, Morgan likened asylum seekers to murderers and drug dealers while criticizing the Biden administration’s supposed slow-walking of re-implementing Trump’s exceedingly cruel “Remain in Mexico” program.

### **Economy: Lying about Democratic legislation and blaming unemployment benefits for a tight labor market**

- In late March and early April, news segments on *The National Desk* aired misleading criticism of President Joe Biden’s infrastructure proposals from corporate front groups and organizations that favor an anti-spending austerity agenda.
- In late April, two guests on the program dubiously claimed that Biden’s infrastructure spending would lead to lower wages and fewer jobs.

- In late May, *The National Desk* hosted a guest from the right-wing National Taxpayers Union who falsely blamed Biden for the scheduled expiration of some of Trump's tax cuts.
- Throughout May and June, guests on *The National Desk* repeatedly claimed that enhanced unemployment benefits were stopping people from seeking jobs -- an argument that experts rejected. In reality, August reporting and commentary from economists showed that states which cut these benefits early actually saw less job growth than states which retained them. Guests on the show pushed this false claim at least as recently as September.
- In mid-July, a guest from the Cato Institute dubiously claimed the then-\$3.5 trillion infrastructure reconciliation bill could ultimately lead to a recession.
- On August 10, the show's anchor told a whopper of a lie when she miscited a right-wing organization to claim that the bipartisan infrastructure bill would add \$400 *trillion*, instead of million, to the national debt.
- On October 11, conservative anti-tax activist Grover Norquist appeared on the show and dubiously blamed the pending Democratic legislation for companies not creating jobs as fast as expected.
- In November, conservative guests falsely claimed the Build Back Better legislation would worsen inflation, even though reputable economists and top ratings agencies said it would ease inflation in the long term. *National Desk* guests continued to echo this claim into December.

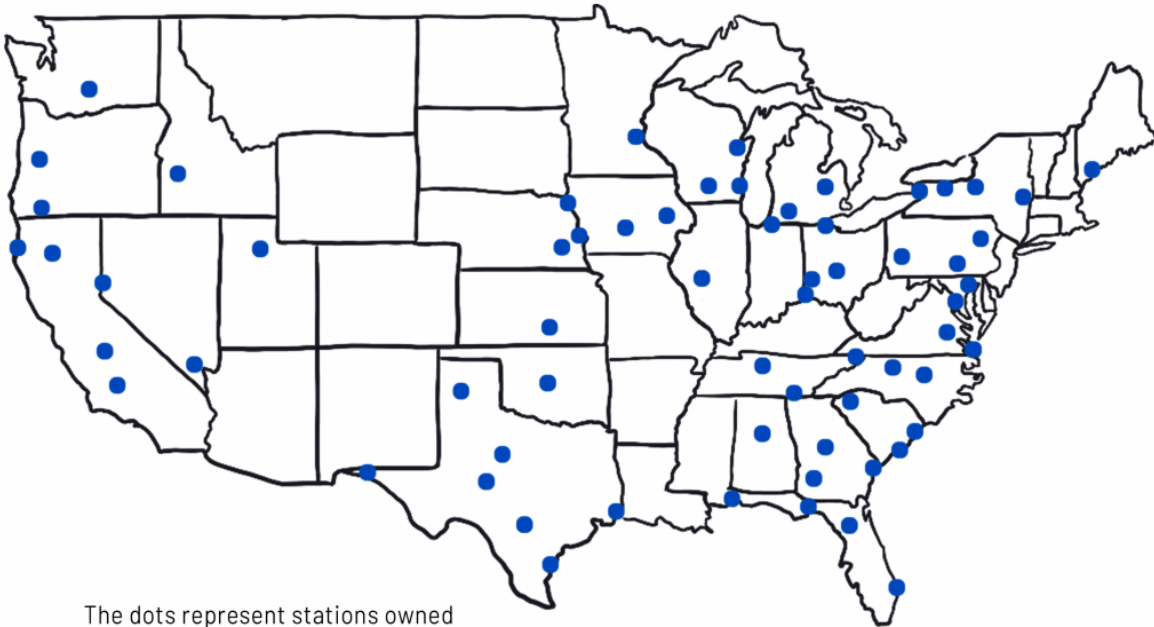
**Education: Smearing a teachers union and attacking the teaching of race and inequality in America while disguising right-wing activists as concerned parents or students**

- In early March, *National Desk* correspondent Angela Brown misrepresented a conservative activist as representative of college graduates in order to launch a misleading attack on student debt cancellation.
- In May, *The National Desk* followed other conservative media in freaking out over the American Federation of Teachers expressing reasonable concerns to the CDC about teachers' safety during schools reopening after hundreds of teachers had died.
- Since May, the program has frequently pushed Republican lies about so-called "critical race theory." It has repeatedly hosted an activist who opposes teaching the history of racism and promoted efforts by right-wing organizations to counter anti-racist education.
- On August 23, Jeffcoat interviewed conservative pundit and activist Derrick Wilburn about his opposition to critical race theory, introducing him as merely a local "dad" while hiding his history of punditry and activism.
- The program has also repeatedly promoted the right-wing group Moms for Liberty, while mostly hiding its ties to the Republican Party, right-wing funding groups, and other right-wing organizations. And there are numerous other examples of *The National Desk* promoting Republican attacks on anti-racist education.

## **Democracy: Platforming pro-insurrection Republican lawmakers and lying about Democrats' efforts to protect voting rights**

- On May 12, Jeffcoat interviewed insurrection-supporting congressional Reps. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) and Jody Hice (R-GA) over their efforts to oust Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) as the GOP conference chair because of her opposition to Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.
- In June, Jeffcoat allowed two Republican senators to lie about the contents of Democrats' For the People Act, which would streamline federal election rules and make it easier for all voters to participate in elections.
- On June 29, Jeffcoat interviewed a longtime right-wing conspiracy theorist to promote his event to overturn and replace the U.S. Constitution. More than a week later, the show followed up with another report about the event, misleadingly portraying the attendees as mainstream conservative political figures and downplaying the extremism of its agenda.
- On July 22, *The National Desk* helped Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH) smear House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) after she kicked him off the January 6 select committee because of his efforts and statements in support of Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election and the January 6 insurrection.
- On August 19, Jeffcoat interviewed Linda McMahon of the Trump-affiliated America First Policy Institute to promote its new "Center for Election Integrity." During the interview, Jeffcoat failed to mention that Republicans undermined the integrity of and attempted to steal the 2020 election, and she neglected to mention the GOP's widespread voter suppression efforts throughout the year.
- On January 5, Jeffcoat interviewed Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger about allegations from a right-wing organization that there was so-called "ballot harvesting" during the 2021 Senate runoff and 2020 presidential elections. Jeffcoat took the bait and asked if Raffensperger had "concerns" about the outcome of the 2020 election, while ignoring the dubious sources of these claims. True the Vote, the right-wing organization which made the allegation to the secretary of state's office, routinely makes baseless claims of voter fraud and was investigated for allegedly intimidating voters during the 2010 midterm elections. The organization that *The National Desk* relied on for the interview, Just The News, has -- along with its founder -- promoted baseless 2020 election conspiracy theories, including at least one about Georgia.

## Where Sinclair Broadcast Group is airing conservative misinformation from the morning edition of *The National Desk*



The dots represent stations owned or operated by Sinclair Broadcast Group that air at least part of the morning edition of *The National Desk*.

The Sinclair station locations are based on the map at <https://sbgi.net/tv-stations>, and the station list was provided by Sinclair Broadcast Group. To learn more, visit [FindSinclair.com](https://FindSinclair.com).

**MEDIAMATTERS**  
FOR AMERICA