

Sinclair's morning news anchor repeatedly pushed COVID-19 misinformation during *The National Desk*'s launch week

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Three times during the first week of Sinclair Broadcast Group's new morning news program, *The National Desk*, anchor Jan Jeffcoat falsely suggested that lockdowns don't work to limit the spread of COVID-19. This misinformation about the pandemic had previously been removed by Sinclair from another of its programs, which has since been canceled.

Sinclair launched *The National Desk* on January 18, and the program airs every weekday morning "across the country and will be available on 68 Sinclair stations, including all Sinclair's MY and CW Network channels." According to Sinclair's press release, Jeffcoat will "provide audiences with commentary-free news coverage from both a local and national perspective," with contributions from local and national Sinclair reporters.

But during the show's first week, Jeffcoat has also provided Sinclair audiences with misinformation related to the devastating COVID-19 pandemic.

It began on *The National Desk*'s premiere episode, when Jeffcoat cited California's spike in cases to falsely suggest that lockdowns are ineffective in slowing the spread of the coronavirus. Her guest that time, a surgeon who also works as a senior fellow at the right-leaning Cato Institute, agreed with her. They then called for the economy to reopen even as the U.S. was approaching 400,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths. (In fact, other news organizations which interviewed actual public health and infectious disease experts have explained how lockdowns disrupt transmission of the virus, thus saving lives.)

JAN JEFFCOAT (ANCHOR): From vaccine shortages to infection rates and shutdowns, Dr. Jeffrey Singer with the Cato Institute joins us right now to break down some of the top coronavirus headlines this Monday morning.

JEFFCOAT: So, the CDC predicts more than 90,000 Americans could die of COVID in the next three weeks. Are these lockdowns even working, because California is one of the most restrictive states, even shutting down outdoor dining. You know, I used to live there, so I saw this firsthand, and yet if you look at the numbers, they have a massive spike in cases and deaths. So are these shutdowns worth it?

JEFFREY SINGER (CATO INSTITUTE SENIOR FELLOW): Well, you know, I think the evidence shows that the lockdowns are not working. California's been one of the most restrictive

states for several months, since almost early last spring, and unless you're a small island nation with a small population and completely hermetically seal yourself -- like, for example, New Zealand did, where nobody comes in or out of the country -- and even then, when the lockdown is lifted cases start reappearing. It's apparent that it's a very damaging way of approaching this. And it's important that we consider all of the trade-offs involved.

So, for example, lockdowns -- not only do they cause economic damage to a lot of people, and poverty is one of the social determinants of health, but our young children are missing crucial milestones in their cognitive and social development because they're not getting in-person education. We're seeing an increase in depression, increase in suicides, increase in substance use disorders, delays in diagnoses of important medical conditions, including cancer, which is all going to show itself in the statistics in the next few years. So, I think now we know a lot more than we did a year ago, and I think we should try to have a much more targeted and focused approach to restricting activity, focusing on the most vulnerable, and allowing the least vulnerable to try to engage in as much normal life as possible with the stipulation that they, you know, those people need to also practice important good hygiene like physical distancing, hand-washing, mask-wearing, and not associating with people who are vulnerable.

JEFFCOAT: Exactly, but like you said, open up the economy, because the mental health of so many people right now is so bad.

Jeffcoat returned to this misleading theme on January 21, during an interview with Tara Kirk Sell of Johns Hopkins University's Center for Health Security. This time, Jeffcoat's guest pushed back against her suggestion that lockdowns are ineffective.

From the January 21, 2021, edition of Sinclair Broadcast Group's The National Desk

JAN JEFFCOAT (ANCHOR): Now, California continues to see unprecedented numbers, with both deaths and infection rates. And yet, of all the states, as we know, California has some of the biggest restrictions and they've had those restrictions since March. Do these shutdowns work?

TARA KIRK SELL (JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR HEALTH SECURITY): I think that's a natural question, but, you know, we've seen that really aggressive plans can work. We have seen that in several countries like China and New Zealand. But I always think that it's important that you make plans that people can comply with, right? They have realistic goals. If you ask people to quarantine and you don't support them with food or help them with their employment situation, they're not going to do it. So you really have to think about all sides of that.

The next day, Jeffcoat returned to her obsession with California's rising COVID-19 case numbers despite the state's "strictest shutdowns" while interviewing Dr. Nina Radcliff, an anesthesiologist. Radcliff pushed back against Jeffcoat's assertion that lockdowns don't work, in part by citing the presence of a new variant of the virus in the state.

JAN JEFFCOAT (ANCHOR): Dr. Radcliff, why do you think we're seeing hot spots in places like California, with the strictest shutdowns, and yet in Florida, new case reports fell around Jacksonville and Miami?

DR. NINA RADCLIFF: Well, it's dynamic. Every state and every county is different, so it's hard to meet scathing conclusions as to why. Most of it has to do with personal responsibility or

personal behaviors, but that's not isolated to just California, like not wearing a face mask, social gatherings. But one thing we found is that California does have a new variant, and they found this incidentally when they were trying to sequence the genome for the U.K. variant that you know has been spreading like wildfire. They found this coincidentally. So that's one of the aspects.

Another is the COVID fatigue and a loss of trust of elected officials. People are being told, don't do this, lockdown, but they're seeing their elected officials at restaurants doing everything that they were told not to do. Additionally, there's been mixed messages when it comes to public policy -- they're closing parks, but they're keeping malls and retail stores open. So people are saying, "Why, this doesn't make sense, so forget about it." And others are just thinking, "Hey, if the malls are open, it's safe." So again, it comes down to a lot of our behaviors. Regardless of what's going on around you, wearing a face mask, staying socially distant, washing your hands, and staying home if you're sick and getting tested are very important to being able to prevent yourself from getting the virus.

Jeffcoat's questioning carelessly implies that lockdowns don't work. And it's an avoidable mistake -- she could have simply asked how much *worse* California's COVID-19 case numbers would be if it didn't have restrictions in place.

Sinclair's program has shown how it can cover the pandemic in ways that don't privilege conservative misinformation. One segment which aired on January 21 included a look back at the treatment of the first confirmed COVID-19 patient in the U.S. in January 2020. The segment ended with an emphasis on the need to wear face masks, practice social distancing, and get vaccinated in order to end the pandemic.

On January 22, *The National Desk* aired a report exploring the hesitancy of some Black Americans to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, given our nation's history of mistreating Black people in the field of medicine. The segment featured health care consultant Devona Stripling to encourage other Black Americans to get vaccinated.

Another segment aired that day covered the struggle to get vaccines approved for children so they could return to school safely, pointing out that young children do sometimes get sick and die from COVID-19.

It would be a huge disservice to Jeffcoat's viewers -- and possibly endanger lives -- if she were to turn her program into a hub of COVID-19 misinformation, like former Sinclair host Eric Bolling did in the months before his program's cancellation. In October, Bolling made a thematically similar claim in his monologue, stating that "closing down cities and economies and wearing your tube socks around your face hasn't slowed the virus down." After Media Matters' reporting, Bolling's monologue was edited to remove that line before it was aired. That isn't an option for *The National Desk*, which broadcasts live and has the potential to spread misinformation much more frequently.