

**IHSS Covid-19 Working Group  
(Paper No. 02)**

Title: Building and Undermining Trust in Covid-19 Science and Government Response through Documentaries

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Date: May 2021

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It is widely recognized, both in the general public and within the scientific community that there is a lack of trust in science and expertise (Mathieson 2016; McIntyre 2016; Boele-Wolki 2018; Nyhan 2020). Developing accessible jargon-free communication of scientific ideas has been identified as one of the crucial ways for rebuilding this trust (Eise 2019; Germani 2020). With its growing popularity since the 1990s documentary film provides one such option. Moreover, because documentary has been traditionally understood as a film genre whose goal is to be truthful (Winston 1995; Nichols 2017), the genre seems particularly well placed for the above function. The trouble is that the same assumed appeal to truthfulness makes documentary as good a vehicle for undermining this trust or for building misplaced trust.

In this report, therefore, I survey some of the documentaries focusing on Covid-19 and discuss the modes in which they try to build or undermine trust in the science and government responses to the pandemic. Among the most prominent examples of undermining trust, I discuss three conspiracy-theory films *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19* (2020, US, Willis), *Plandemic: Indoctrination* (2020, US, Willis) and *Hold Up* (2021, France, Barnerias). Among those building trust in science but criticising government responses I turn to *Coronavirus Explained* (2020, US, Netflix) and *Totally Under Control* (2020, US, Gibney). For films which praise both science and government responses but exhibit propagandist tendencies in the latter I tackle *A Beacon of Hope: The UK Vaccine Story* (2021, UK, Downing Street) and *Days and Nights in Wuhan* (2021, China, Jingling). There are also films like *Inside Italy's Covid War* (2020, US, Achilli) and *76 Days* (2020, US, Wu, Chen & Anonymous) whose focus is on personal stories and whose trust building/undermining works implicitly.

Interestingly, with the exception of documentaries on AIDS relatively few documentaries on pandemics have appeared before the outbreak of Covid-19 (some notable exceptions include an episode of *Explained* titled “Next Pandemic” and released in November 2019 and the 2018 *Contagion! The BBC Four Pandemic* commemorating the centennial of the outbreak of Spanish influenza). This is even more striking when compared to the number of documentaries on topics such as world wars (just think of the countless shows on World War Two on the History Channel), especially with the fact in mind that only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the smallpox pandemic alone is estimated to have killed c.300 million people (Henderson 2009), far more than all the wars combined in the same period.

Fiction film representations of pandemics, by contrast, have been around for a while since at least 1919 and the German production *Pest in Florenz / The Plague of Florence* (Rippert). Such films have already been treated as subgenres and cycles by scholars before the Covid-19 outbreak (Wald 2008, Cooke 2009, Schweitzer 2018), while in the wake of the outbreak some scholars have argued that the films have come to constitute a genre of their own (Slugan 2021). Fiction pandemic films seem to revolve around the dichotomy of the infected and the healthy and it is the threat of infection that usually drives the narrative. While the narrative may hinge on surviving, rebuilding a society, containing the infection, or even discovering a cure, the infected themselves can take the form of vampires, zombies, impassive vessels, rabid creatures, leaking bodies, gruesome corpses, or simply very sick individuals. If there has been one dominant form of pandemic movies it is the zombie films (as opposed to more realistic films like *Contagion* [2011, US, Soderbergh]), suggesting, much like the general absence of films about climate change, that it is easier to imagine a world-ending apocalypse than more nuanced changes and alternatives to our current way of life.

Given the relative dearth of documentary films on the subject, it makes sense then that unlike with fiction films, scholarly studies of documentaries focusing on pandemics are even rarer (cf. Ostherr 2005). I propose, therefore, to draft a brief outline of the general traits of such movies before proceeding to discuss their subtypes and specific films. While fiction pandemic

movies usually focus on individuals trying to avoid the infection, documentaries generally take a much broader approach looking at the virus and the reactions to it by a variety of actors (scientists, governments, international organizations, citizens, etc.) at personal, national, or global level. Moreover, even when there is more interest in personal stories it is less about the threat of infection than dealing with its consequences. When it comes to the most widely used taxonomy of documentary films (Nichols 2017), the movies in question may fall in expository, observational, poetic, and participative mode.

For our purposes of building and undermining trust we can divide the documentaries depicting Covid-19 under four general headings: personal stories, critical-informative, propagandist, and conspirational. Personal stories documentaries like *Inside Italy's Covid War, 76 Days*, and *CoroNation* (2020, US, Ai) mostly focus on medical staff and those afflicted. Critical-informative ones including *Coronavirus Explained, Totally under Control, Outbreak: The Virus that Shook the World* (2021, UK, ITV), *American Catastrophe* (2020, US, ABC), *In the Same Breath* (2021, US, Wang), *The Curve* (2020, US, Benzine), try to give information about the global developments while often focusing on the national level and taking a critical look at the government responses. There is also a propagandist tendency as seen in *A Beacon of Hope: The UK Vaccine Story* and *Days and Nights in Wuhan* which depict national governments – which are essentially the films' main funders – in a very positive light. Lastly, those like the *Plandemic* series or *Hold Up* present conspiracy theories which range from criticism of specific actors to claims that Covid-19 pandemic is a pre-planned ploy for population control.

Crucially, the essay is not intended as an exercise in fact-checking or an analysis of the validity of arguments of any of these films, but rather as a brief account of the rhetorical means behind building and undermining trust. I focus here mostly on the use of language with some space also devoted to the films' formal features i.e., what Nichols refers to as modes.

## **Personal Stories**

In documentaries telling personal stories about Covid-19 the stakes for the public trust and mistrust are the lowest among the four groups identified here as their primary function is not disseminating public health information but emotionally engaging the viewer on a human level. They convey very little information about the virus itself (except for its human cost) and instead depict the struggles of medical personnel and ordinary citizens, primarily those afflicted and their family members. Oftentimes, this is framed as a tale of perseverance, sacrifice, and ultimately, an overall victory over the virus. In terms of modes, we are often dealing with the observational or “fly on the wall” mode where filmmakers try to be as unobtrusive as possible with some influences from the poetic mode in trying to evoke the mood of the situation (as seen in the typical scenes of empty quarantined cities). As such, the question of trust is more implied than explicit and primarily relates to medical workers.

Francesca Mangiatordi, whose monologue opens *Inside Italy's Covid War*, is the film's protagonist. Although it is clear that she is a medical professional as the camera slowly traverses the exterior of the hospital where she works and as she speaks of her 12-hour shift, her trustworthiness derives primarily from the empathy with which she talks about the patients' suffering rather than any specialist training she has (interestingly, “Dr” next to her name which appears after her image eventually joins the voice is in smaller font than “Francesca Mangiatordi” similarly suggesting that she is first and foremost a human being). It is this personal investment in patients and her devotion to them as well as her role as a loving wife and mother that depicts her as somebody any patient would be happy to be cared for. This

trustworthiness is further augmented by the rhetoric of comparing the pandemic to war (made abundantly clear already in the title) which, by extension, makes both the medical workers and the patients heroes. Mangiatordi is imagined as Captain America by her son, the medical colleagues diagnosed with Covid-19 are described as the fallen, while an 18-year-old patient Mattia who almost died is a hero for resisting so valiantly and a soldier who has to rest after the battle.

Stylistically, we are dealing with the observational mode where there is no narrator, the film crew self-effaces itself and the impression is being conveyed that what we see is authentic, unstaged, unfiltered, and, as such, worthy of our trust.

### **Critical-Informative Documentaries**

The second group of documentaries on Covid-19 are the ones that operate within the gold standard of journalism subscribing to truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, independence, accountability, and transparency (cf. American Society of News Editors 2006; Society of Professional Journalists 2014). In this sense, they also function within the parameters of traditionally understood documentary as a claim to an objective, discoverable reality. Their primary function is to inform the public about the virus and/or about the government responses to it. Insofar as they capitalise on evidentiary editing where images usually work in tandem with what is being said by the narrator or the subjects, they are usually a part of what Nichols refers to as expository mode. In the first episode of *Coronavirus Explained*, for instance, we learn about the virus' name, biology, transmission, symptoms, prognosis, origins, family tree, deadliness, level of contagion, treatment, containment, testing, etc. While *Coronavirus Explained* makes some references to government responses and discusses how an ideal response would look like, *Totally under Control* focuses on the Trump administration's reaction to the pandemic and criticizes it for its numerous failings.

In these films it is the scientists, whistle-blowers, and public health experts who are represented as authorities in their fields and as such trustworthy. The trustworthiness also derives from their common-sense human ideals such as scientific objectivity, deep commitment to truth, and value of human life. In *Coronavirus Explained* Peter Daszak, for instance, is introduced with the title "Dr" and "Ecohealth Alliance, President" which together with his relatively technical discussion of zoonotic viruses (those jumping species) immediately conjures up an idea of a scientific and public health expert who knows what he is talking about. Similarly, in *Totally under Control*, the whistle blower Rick Bright "Dr, BARDA Director, 2016-2020" first appears to speak to his long-time service in the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority as a leading bridge between the government and the industry in development of vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics.

On the other side, it is the administration which usually inspires the lack of confidence through a combination of incompetence and self-preservation (mostly expressed through denial and cover-up). In the same film, the then current President of the US Donald Trump, for instance, is introduced as accusing the Democratic party of politicizing the Covid-19 and presenting the pandemic as another left-wing hoax which together with the images of his implied supporters licking supermarket produce and deliberately coughing in their compatriots faces instantly presents a vision of a president interested only in pandering to its conspiracy-engulfed fringe base which not only has no regard for others' health but is actively trying to spread the disease. All these introductions last barely half a minute yet they invariably set the tone of who is to be trusted and who is to be suspicious of.

These films also often include a voice-over narrator and minimal signs of the presence of the filmmakers, further contributing to the idea of objectivity and impartiality by having numerous statements and claims presented with an aura of a disembodied and disinterested authority often referred to as the voice of god. It is the combination of the authority of the subjects interviewed and the self-effacing nature of the overall presentation that are the main mechanisms for assigning trust and mistrust in subjects presented.

### **Propagandist Documentaries**

The primary function of propagandist documentaries is to present the relevant authorities which are also essentially the key financial backers of the film in the best light possible. This is usually done through the combination of the emphasis on actually successful responses and the systemic omission of failures. In other words, there is a complete lack of criticism in these films and what is presented is an idealized version of the events with the express purpose of shoring up support and laudation for the actions presented to the audiences. Importantly, this category is by no means reserved for authoritarian regimes.

A case in point is *A Beacon of Hope: The UK Vaccine Story*, released on 10 Downing Street's YouTube and Twitter accounts on April 23, 2021. As the title suggest, the film presents the UK government's vaccination programme – from its inception in March 2020 until well into the vaccine rollout a year later – in superlatives. On the one hand, it serves as a sort of protracted public health service message in explaining the timeline and logistics of the vaccination programme and calling on to maintain the vaccination momentum (throughout the film, speakers sit next to signs “Stay Home / Protect the NHS / Save Lives”). On the other, it showers special praise on the Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other cabinet and vaccine workgroup members finding no fault in any of their actions.

This basic mechanism for establishment of subject authority and their trustworthiness is the same as in critical-informative documentaries. Again, the interviewed subjects – public health experts, scientists, government officials, and industrialists – are flanked by their names and academic and expert titles: “Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England”, “Pascal Soriot, Chief Executive Officer AstraZeneca”, “Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom”, or “Professor Sir John Bell, Regius Professor of Medicine, Oxford University”. But here we also have additional laudations that subjects offer of each other, reminiscent of mutual film star adulations during the interviews in the runup of a film premiere. Kate Bingham, Chair of the Vaccine Task Force is introduced by Van Tam as a “venture capitalist, really experienced investor, absolutely the right person in the right job at the exactly the right time” while Sir Patrick Vallance adds that “she is a force of nature, extraordinary”. Bingham, in turn, sings peans to Johnson as a determined leader who sets clear objectives: “Secure vaccines for the UK”, “Secure vaccines for international distribution”, and “Ensure UK was better setup for future pandemics”. While the UK has indeed been the first to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 Vaccine for emergency use and is among the best in Europe and the world in vaccine administration (Ledford, Cyranski & Van Noorden 2020; Hirsch and Busquets Guardia 2021), the government's failings on other fronts including early responses to the pandemic focusing largely on herd immunity and the problematic nature of the use of public funds on Covid-19 contracts just to name a few are completely missing (Quinn and Walker 2021; Transparency International UK 2021).

Another example of a propagandist tendency, *Days and Nights in Wuhan*, could easily fall under the category of personal stories were it not for the fact that it was sponsored by the Chinese Government's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television

and came out on the anniversary of the Wuhan lockdown. In its narrative and stylistic aspects, the film is very similar to *Inside Italy's Covid War* – with the minimal intervention of filmmakers the film does not provide any general timelines but plays on the spectators' emotions by following the hardships of the medical staff and their patients in a single city over the period of the first quarantine and by closing with an upbeat message of perseverance and overcoming. At some moments *Days and Nights in Wuhan* is, admittedly, even more daring than *Inside Italy's Covid War* as it depicts a number of patients eventually succumbing to their affliction (a scene in which a medical worker is prevented from seeing her dying father in the same hospital where she is stationed is especially gut-wrenching) – something that the film set in Italy avoids by focusing only on the convalescent.

But at other times, omissions come to the fore and warn of idealizations as it is when it becomes obvious that not a single medical worker is presented as discussing any personal fears about getting infected. The same can be said of the level of orderliness presented throughout the film; as opposed to Italy there are no lack of beds, there are no decisions on who is to be put on a ventilator and who is to be left to die, everything runs like such a well-oiled machine that it strains credulity. And indeed, we only need to remember the early videos from January 2020 coming from Wuhan attesting to the early chaos and the case of the whistle-blower Dr Li Wenliang who was ordered by the police to “stop making false comments” and himself died from Covid-19 that the situation was not as rosy as it is depicted (BBC 2021).

These omissions are even more striking when compared to *76 Days*, a film which covers the same 76-day Wuhan quarantine and includes literally some of the same shots as *Days and Nights in Wuhan*.<sup>1</sup> In one of the scenes from *76 Days*, for instance, desperate citizens bang on the door of the hospital while medical workers have to restrain them by threatening that if they do not calm down nobody will be let in. Nothing remotely similar can be found in *Days and Nights in Wuhan*. In fact, while *Days and Nights in Wuhan* overall exudes stoic tranquillity interspersed with bursts of grief quickly transcended by a return to normal, *76 Days* depicts a hard-hitting state of exception. Both approaches are legitimate from a filmmaker's perspective but we should always keep in mind where the funding for which film is coming from.

### **Conspirational Documentaries**

On a stylistic level, conspirational documentaries tend to belong to the participatory mode where the filmmaker, by inserting himself (in all three documentaries discussed the director is male) into the story and presenting himself as trustworthy, augments the overall rhetorical effect. In *Plandemic* and its sequel *Plandemic: Indoctrination* the director Mikki Willis is presented as “Father / Filmmaker” and appeals explicitly to the idea that somebody with a child of their own would never deliberately peddle in misinformation. The film also regularly cuts to reaction shots of Willis who listens attentively and often with a confirming nod to what his interlocutor has to say, thereby further cementing the trustworthiness of the subject matter. While this last strategy is for the most part missing from *Hold Up*, on occasions we still see the film's director Pierre Barnérias preparing for the interviews. More importantly, the film is introduced as “a citizen's film” made “with the participation of 5232 inhabitants of the Earth” evoking the idea of a communal spirit behind the endeavour.

In terms of danger, this is the group which presents the greatest risks when it comes to undermining trust. While propagandist documentaries do build trust in actors who normally deserve more suspicion, these films at least operate mainly by omission, so it is not so much that they give blatantly wrong information as it is that they give far less than a full picture.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the return of personal items from the deceased.

Moreover, propagandist documentaries do not undermine trust in science. Lastly, as it is easy to identify their funders it is always possible to take a healthy sceptical stance and watch them with the expectation that funders expect a kind treatment by the filmmakers.

Conspirational documentaries, by contrast, undermine trust in the whole system, including, expectedly, the governments, but extending through international organizations and public health experts to the majority of scientists. Furthermore, it is not that these actors are error-prone or incompetent, but rather that they all participate in a worldwide conspiracy aided by big tech, big pharma, media monopolies, and powerful wealthy individuals whose primary goal is population control.

Despite this, there is no blanket dismissal of scientists, because it is still scientists, albeit who we might now call dissident scientists, who do the heavy lifting in conspirational films in securing trust of the theses presented. Much like with critical-informative and conspirational documentaries it is again scientific credentials that prime our trust. In *Plandemic*, for instance, the protagonist is introduced with “Dr Judy Mikovits has been called one of the most accomplished scientists of her generation. Her 1991 doctoral thesis revolutionized the treatment of HIV/AIDS. At the height of her career, Dr. Mikovits published a blockbuster article in the journal *Science*.” It is difficult for Mikovits not to have the audiences’ ear when she then goes on to accuse Dr Anthony Fauci of destroying her reputation and holding up her papers which led to millions of HIV/AIDS deaths. Similarly, next to a string of scientists, academics, and journalists, *Hold Up*, even boasts Nobel laureates introduced with texts “Michael Levitt, Biophysicist, Chemist & Nobel Prize in Chemistry” and “Luc Montagnier, Virologist & Nobel Prize in Medicine”. When people like them say that the fear of Covid-19 is fabricated, and that the virus is man-made they have the audiences’ attention.

At the same time, there are others (scientists, public figures, institutions) who are not to be trusted. Fauci, the director of the US National Institute of Allergy, a member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force under Trump, and chief medical advisor to the current President Joe Biden, leads the bill. As can be gleaned from the previous paragraph, the dominant strategy is to set up a trustworthy person – Mikovits – and then have her attack the subject. Another prominent antagonist is Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which heavily invests in public health. The strategy to discredit Gates usually involves criticizing his character through a combination of facts and ad hominem attacks. *Plandemic: Indoctrination*, for instance, presents clips from Gates’ obfuscating and evasive deposition given at the time of antitrust litigation against Microsoft in 1998 as well as claims that Gates met the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein on at least 6 occasions. Person of such character and company, it is argued, cannot be a true philanthropist.

One of the crucial problems with conspirational documentaries, then, is that they do not merely present a string of falsities but combine them with truths as well as much in between. Mikovits, for example, did publish a paper in *Science* although she was not widely known in the field, nor had she revolutionized the treatment of HIV/AIDS (Enserink and Cohen 2020). Moreover, conspiracy can always appeal to the fact of historical existence of conspiracies in medicine and public health such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In it, for 40 years African American subjects were deliberately deceived about their health status and treatment by the US Public Health Service in order to track the natural course of untreated syphilis.<sup>2</sup> Combine that with the fact that the idea that the virus has been man-made has been gaining traction since mid-May 2021 after having been widely criticized by the scientific community (Connexion 2020; Cillizza 2021) and it becomes clear why these films have wide appeal. In other words,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>.

conspirational documentaries capitalize on what might be termed the all-encompassing suspicion which puts everything under a question mark.

This is further problematized by only a thin line separating the all-encompassing suspicion from the calls to question everything embedded in the ideas of critical thinking.<sup>3</sup> It is true that conspirational documentaries regularly exhibit shoddy reasoning – e.g., in both *Plandemic: Indoctrination* and *Hold Up* a global pandemic exercise held on October 18, 2019 which outlines a fictional pandemic scenario and identifies many of the problems unfolding following the actual Covid-19 outbreak is taken as proof of Covid-19 pandemic being pre-planned rather than as evidence that scientific community and public health experts have for years warned that a pandemic is bound to happen and that we need to be better prepared for it. But after all the fact-checking and pointing out to logical fallacies, it is still hard to wrestle away from the appeal of the conspirationists' overarching idea of challenging the accepted wisdom. We can and should find faults with, say, the claims from *Plandemic: Indoctrination* that fact checking organisations are essentially under the thumb of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and similar actors. But the larger point that we regularly put our trust in various bodies and experts to do the fact checking on our behalf, be it journalists for political facts, scientists for scientific facts or, say, historians for historical facts, holds. And the idea that none of these institutions is beyond reproach i.e., that they partake in societal power struggles, is something that the conspirationists share with humanities and social scientists.

## Conclusion

If there is one group of people who are invariably depicted as trustworthy in all these films, it is the frontline medical workers. While at most they might be duped by the powers that be according to conspirationist filmmakers, they are nevertheless committed to saving human lives at a potential expense of their own. The key to this is that their trustworthiness is less a matter of their professional training than their empathy and genuine concern for their patients.

Another group which is almost never depicted as problematic are the regular citizens which is particularly interesting because after all it is the regular people who are the disease vectors and whose responsible or irresponsible behaviour in large parts contributes to the unfolding of the pandemic. (One exception is *Totally under Control* but here it could be argued we are dealing with a specific subgroup of extremists.)

Depending on the type of film, furthermore, it is often the same people who are depicted as being trustworthy or worthy of suspicion. Whereas for critical-informative films experts and influential public health players like Fauci and Gates will count as authority figures, for conspirational documentaries the same duo will form the key set of conspirators. But even in these cases the final authority for dispensing such status will again be scientific, be it an uncontroversial expert like Daszak or a dissident scientist like Montaigner. Importantly, while those deemed trustworthy are regularly interviewed by the filmmakers, those who are to be regarded with suspicion never are. They are virtually never given an opportunity to speak for themselves with the filmmaker.

At this point I might finally need to address the elephant in the room: how does a paper which claims only to analyse the mechanisms of rhetorics and allegedly avoids making judgement on the truths of the claims comes up with the labels such as critical-informative,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Critical thinking is essentially a questioning, challenging approach to knowledge and perceived wisdom. It involves ideas and information from an objective position and then questioning this information in the light of our own values, attitudes and personal philosophy" (Eales-Reynolds 2013: 9).



propagandist, and conspirational in the first place? After all, a Chinese official could easily label films critical of the Chinese government such as *Outbreak: The Virus that Shook the World* as propagandist, a UK official involved with *A Beacon of Hope: The UK Vaccine Story* will certainly call the film critical-informative rather than propagandist, and the filmmakers behind *Hold Up* will most likely treat critical-informative films like *Coronavirus Explained* as being a part of the worldwide conspiracy. Although they might be disingenuous, such labelling still passes judgements on the truthfulness of the general claims presented in the films labelled. And indeed, I have passed such judgements through the labelling I employed. But that I focus on the rhetorical analysis instead of on the logical validity and factual accuracy of films, does not mean that I have not checked the logical validity and factual accuracy of film in my own critical viewing of them nor does it mean I cannot pass judgment on their truthfulness. In the end, that is all that can be asked from any viewer.

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