

Systematic Review of COVID Films Screened by Festivals During 2020 and The Basis of an Archive of Films to Support Research on the Social Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Pandemics are rare public health occurrences which can have profound social, economic and political consequences. Researchers have called for a more robust global research and data infrastructure that will support study in to the economic and social impacts of pandemics including the COVID-19 pandemic.

We argue that film should form a key component of this evidence about the impact of pandemics as contemporaneous commentary within films can be informative of what life is like during these rare events and may help us to better piece together the social sequelae resulting from pandemics.

In this manuscript, we outline a method to collate films about the COVID-19 pandemic using a systematic review of all the film festivals undertaken in 2020.

Finally, we call for other researchers who may have compiled similar lists of COVID films to publish their methods and share their own findings for further discussion about the creation of a global resource of films to study these rare events.

INTRODUCTION

Pandemics are rare public health occurrences which can have profound social, economic and political consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already caused substantial economic shocks, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicting that the global economic output would shrink by 3% [1] and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of some countries such as the UK falling by as much as 10% [2].

Some of the social impacts of the pandemic have become evident such as the tendency to exacerbate social inequality seen in the differential mortality rates by race/ ethnicity and the differential access to online education. However, at present it is difficult to assess or quantify the full range of social impacts from the pandemic as events have yet to play out. It has also been argued that our current range of social sensors and socio-medical reporting are inadequate to gauge the range of social impacts of a pandemic due to the heterogeneity of sequelae in different populations [3].

Thus researchers have called for a more robust global research and data infrastructure that will support study in to the economic and social impacts of pandemics including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The need for better information about the sequelae of pandemics has been given added urgency as evidence suggests that the likelihood of pandemics has increased over the past century due to the increase in global travel and integration, urbanization, changes in land use, and greater exploitation of the natural environment [4].

We argue that film should form a key component of this evidence about the impact of pandemics as contemporaneous commentary within films can be informative of what life is like during these rare events and may help us to better piece together the social sequelae resulting from pandemics.

We have shown that films about the pandemic are still consistently produced from all corners of the world even during the earliest stages of the COVID-19 pandemic despite the substantial impact on the film production and distribution [5].

In this manuscript, we outline a method to collate films about the COVID-19 pandemic using a systematic review of all the film festivals undertaken in 2020.

COLLATING THE EVIDENCE

Whilst many films have been uploaded to social media and video sharing platforms such as Facebook and YouTube during the pandemic, our method prioritized films that had been selected and screened at Film Festivals. This ensures that the COVID films collated using this method will have been assessed for quality by experts who are not part of the film's production.

In order to identify film festivals that had been undertaken during 2020, we screened websites of film festival platforms such as including FilmFreeWay.com and Festhome.com. We also consulted film industry journals including indiewire.com and screendaily.com which had compiled comprehensive lists of festivals in 2020. Finally, we checked film festival catalogues on Wikipedia.com which had compiled a list of festivals in 2020.

In order to identify the COVID films shown at these festivals we downloaded and screened the festival programmers. Where festival programmers were not available online, we wrote to festival organizers to confirm that they had held a film festival in 2020

and asked them to provide us with a copy of their programmer. A film was considered to be related to COVID if the programmer mentioned COVID, coronavirus or pandemic in the film title or synopsis.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

In total we identified 223 film festivals that had been undertaken either in person or virtually during 2020. We obtained programmers for 206 festivals, 92.3% of the total. We found a total of 13,625 films had been screened in these 206 festivals during 2020, of which 303 (2.2%) were related to COVID. The COVID films originated from 36 countries, and varied in length between 1 and 123 minutes. They included films of all genres including documentary, short fiction and animation.

WHAT WE LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

We have shown that a small number of films about COVID were submitted and screened in film festivals around the world during the first year of the pandemic. We believe we have captured information from the majority of film festivals undertaken in 2020 and will make our list publicly available for festival organizers to add any additional information that we have missed.

We encourage other researchers who may have compiled similar lists of COVID films to publish their own methods for further discussion. We would be particularly interested in understanding methods by which films about COVID on social media and video sharing platforms could be screened and curated as these were largely omitted in our method.

Lastly we intend to contact each of the film-makers of these COVID films to seek further information about their work and permission to include them in a public health film archive which will be available for researchers who wish to study the sequelae of this pandemic.

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