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Reflections on running an International Public Health Film Competition during the COVID-19 pandemic and implications for future film festivals

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the film industry in 2020. Films that tell the story of the pandemic by giving independent commentaries are important to our understanding of life during these rare public health events. However, it is unclear what effects the pandemic would have on the production of these films. In this Letter we describe a unique global collaboration that saw the launch of an International Public Health Film Competition during the first wave of the pandemic in early 2020 to collect the 'best health-related' stories told through film. We reflect on the process followed for this competition and provide insights for future film competitions/ festivals.

KEYWORDS

Public health; pandemics; communication, film

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the film industry in 2020 [1]. The global box office is predicted to lose more than US\$17 billion as a result of the closure of cinemas, cancellations of festivals, and postponement of new film releases [2–4]. Film production has also been hampered by social distancing rules and studio closures [5]. This has left many film-makers struggling to make and show their films. However, it is unclear how these substantial shocks to the film industry would affect the production of films about the pandemic.

Collecting objects and memories, including films, that show what life is like during the pandemic is crucial to construct a detailed contemporaneous picture [6]. This information, especially if it is of high quality, can also be used to more faithfully recreate events around the pandemic and facilitate learning about these rare public health occurrences [7].

Thus, whilst there has been an enormous amount of information produced about the pandemic, including charts of numbers of deaths, critical action alerts, and news pieces from affected countries, communities and individuals [8], a lack of high quality films that provide a contemporaneous independent commentary on the pandemic could adversely affect our recollection of events.

In this *Letter* we describe a unique collaboration brought together by the Public Health Film Society (PHFS), a UK based charity, to launch an International Public Health Film Competition during the first wave

of the COVID-19 pandemic. In approaching this collaboration and the film competition, we had several questions that may be important also for future film festivals and competitions during these unprecedented times:

- 1) Could a film competition be run during the early stages of the pandemic to collect stories about health told through the medium of films?
- 2) How many films about COVID would be produced and submitted through the competition?
- 3) What would the quality of the COVID-related films be compared to non COVID-related films?

Launching the International Public Health Film Competition 2020 (IPHFC2020)

We have previously shown that a platform can be created for gathering health-related films, with explicit quality criteria used to select the films [9]. Utilizing this format we launched IPHFC2020 on 20th April 2020, 126 days after the first case of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2 was identified in Wuhan, China and 46 days after the World Health Organisation (WHO) made the assessment that the global spread of the disease called COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic [10].

An announcement was made on the PHFS website and social media platforms whose followers include practitioners, students and film-makers [11]. We placed advertisements on film festival platforms, including FilmFreeWay.com, in order to appeal to

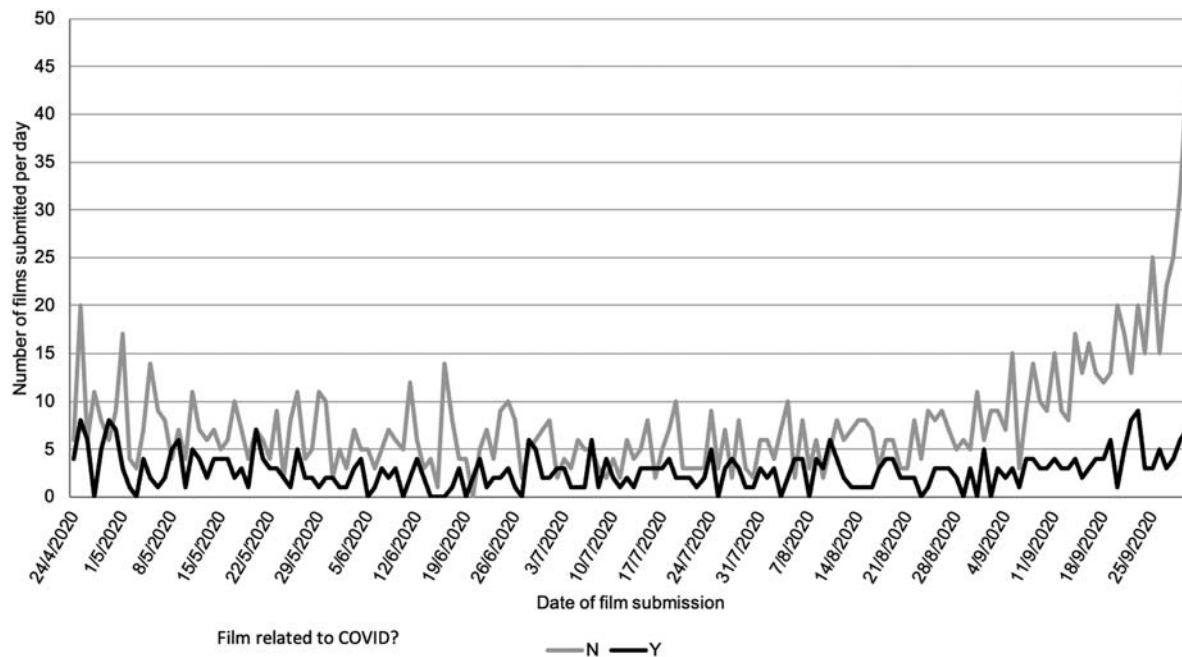


Figure 1. Submissions of films to IPHFC2020.

established film-makers. We also sent emails to film schools globally to encourage submissions from their students and staff, although some schools had been closed to in-person education.

Our advertisements actively encouraged submissions about COVID with the theme of 'Health and wellbeing in a pandemic: stories told through film', although we also made it clear that films on a broad range of subjects relating to health would be accepted. Submissions were open between April–Sept 2020, and it was free to submit films to the competition. For non-English language films, English language subtitles were requested. Information on the impact and evaluation of the films were welcomed.

Compiling the film selection committee and competition judging criteria

We recruited a film selection committee including the Co-Organizer of the American Public Health Association (APHA) Global Public Health Film Festival, the Festival Director of the National/International Science Film Festivals of India, a film-maker and health humanities professional, a senior archivist from the British Film Institute (BFI), a bioethicist, a public health practitioner, and two public health academics. Members of the committee gave their time for free to this project. The a priori film selection criteria used to judge the quality of submission has previously been published [9].

Judging the films

Committee members were asked to declare any involvement in the films submitted or other

conflicts of interest that would sway their decision about individual films, and asked to withdraw from assessing those films. Judging was undertaken in two rounds, with the full committee meeting for the second round of judging to consider the relative merits of the shortlisted films and select competition winners.

A film was considered to be related to COVID if the film-maker mentioned COVID, coronavirus or pandemic in their film title or synopsis of the film. It was also considered to be related to COVID if the judging committee thought that the storyline predominantly featured issues relating to the coronavirus pandemic, even though it was not mentioned in the title or film synopsis. Most film-makers provided a year timestamp for their film, however clarifying information about the time of filming, production and release of the film was not requested.

Films submitted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

In total 1746 films were submitted over the 163 days that the IPHFC2020 was open. This equates to an average rate of 11 films per day of which 3 films were related to COVID (see Figure 1)

62 films were excluded from the analysis because they were duplicates, did not contain English subtitles, or contained overtly sexually explicit material. 1684 films from 112 different countries were considered for short listing.

Approximately 425 h of film footage was screened and scored by UH. The films varied in length from 1 to 342 min covering a broad range of health/social

issues. 442 films were considered to be specifically related to COVID. Non COVID-related films were on average twice the duration of COVID-related films (17 min vs 8 min). 20 films were shortlisted for review by the full Judging Committee, 6 of which were COVID-related films.

The second round of judging involved review, scoring and discussion of the 20 shortlisted films by the full judging committee.

Removing the incomplete scores of judge 6 from the summary statistics, COVID-related films scored on average 7% (381 vs 413) lower than non COVID-related films with the judges, suggesting they may have been of overall lower quality. Of course, this observation is only based on the criteria used for our assessment of the films and may change if different or more lenient criteria are used.

Reflections and recommendations for future film festivals and competitions

A key learning from this experience is that health films still seem to be made in most parts of the world during a pandemic, and that they can be gathered and assessed for quality.

Our experience showed that it was possible to collect a considerable number of health films in the first 200 days after the pandemic was declared. However, the shorter length and lower overall quality of films about the pandemic may reflect the difficulties associated with digesting information gathered during the first wave, then quickly formulating a compelling narrative/ commentary, and accessing suitable resources to tell that story through film, in the midst of a pandemic. These considerations need to be made in planning the timings of future film festival or competition.

We are aware that a number of other film festivals and competitions have been run during the COVID-19 pandemic and would encourage the organizers to assess, and share the films submitted to their events to understand if the observations from our competition are also reflected in their own events.

Finally, we recommend that specific studies are undertaken to assess whether the easing of public health restrictions would result in a flourishing of high-quality films and narratives about the pandemic.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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