

The problem documentary

by LAURA CAMPBELL

I used to always think that the advent of the internet had spoiled our collective understanding of what is true and what isn't objectively factual. But that's not really the case. Conspiracy theories have been around for as long as our human networks have been expansive enough to warrant them. And documentary film has been only one of the latest modes of disseminating vague theories. But where the pre-internet days made conspiracy theory documentaries harder to find, they are now all the more readily available.

There are exceptional documentaries out there. One example is the 2016 doc, 'The Age of Consequences,' which details how the U.S. military is preparing for climate change. The film examines the complicated strategic challenges of our warming planet (both related to infrastructure and security): border wars caused by resource shortages, famine, vulnerability of U.S. bases to extreme weather, etc. The film isn't pursuing an 'agenda'; it is purely informative on the side of the filmmaker. And for the vast majority of people, both on the left and right of the political spectrum, what the U.S. Military does isn't meant to be political (though of course it always is!).

If the Army is taking climate change seriously enough to spend billions preparing for it, then we should think that all of us agree that this problem is objectively 'real.' The Army acting on climate change is an important signal that the science is right. But despite this, there are far too many who continue to cast doubt on the truth of climate change. Indeed, the fact that the US military is talking about climate change simply confirms for the nay-sayers that 'climate change is a government conspiracy.' The evidence presented by the documentary merely deepens the narrative of denial.

Unfortunately, this problem, the deep-seated doubt around science and the scientific process extends into all areas of our knowledge (especially around health and wellness). A couple of weeks ago a 'documentary' (I hesitate to even call it that) was making the rounds on the internet. Titled 'Plandemic,' the short film manufactures a brutal conspiracy theory (it wasn't even remotely plausible) that the Coronavirus was basically planned by an evil web of corporate science (funded by Bill Gates). I won't summarize it here because it's pointless. I did watch it, to understand what our society was up against, especially once the vaccine becomes available. How hard would we have to work to convince the majority of us to get the shot?

My immediate conclusions were: 1) this documentary only interviews ONE person ? how is anyone buying this? 2) This documentary is fueling the anti-vaccination movement 3) there was so much purposeful obfuscation and misleading imagery ? example: using entirely different drug bust arrest footage to make it seem like several hundreds of law enforcers pulled Dr. Judy Mikovits from her home. All of it was terrible on so many levels. But many people watched it, shared it, talked about it, and helped it spread. Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter, all responded by removing the video. Over and over. But for those that believe the message, all of those actions only confirm the conspiracy. Bill Gates and the Deep State are pulling the strings of the internet giants.

No amount of evidence to the contrary matters (and of course, all of the evidence emerged in the immediate aftermath of the video coming online). I feel so terrible for the hundreds of thousands of scientists who work hard on a daily basis to increase our understanding of the human body, to find cures for diseases, rigorously telling the truth, checking their studies, again and again and again, only to have their entire community labelled as part of a vast conspiracy network. I also feel for the many practising clinicians and researchers who are busy working on COVID-19 treatments who had to come home and spend time debunking this terrible video, which shouldn't have even merited a response. But that's 2020 for you.

I do not want to shame a single person for feeling confused, doubtful, scared, and therefore perhaps somewhat convinced by youtube documentaries. The films that regularly make the rounds about government corruption, conspiracy and the like, are often convincing (Plandemic, being an exception, it was not even remotely convincing). Instead, I'd like to suggest two issues that we must correct as a society. We must fight every day to call out dishonesty (intellectual, corporate, or governmental). But we have to do this together. We can't rely on New Age documentaries to tell us what's right and what's not. Government actually has to work a lot harder to show

us how they are making decisions, which information they are using, and how that information is developed.

Here in Canada, we are fairly insulated from the scale of lobbying that happens in the United States. There are no pharmaceutical super pacs or major corporate donors that are pulling the political strings here. Corporate donations are illegal, and while there are certainly some loopholes, (personal connections and friendships that play a role in our system), on the whole our democratic process is much (much) healthier than that of our Southern neighbours. Therefore, conspiracies of the highest order are unlikely as is.

Our public health authorities were unprepared for COVID-19. This does not mean that there is a conspiracy. It means that our systems were underfunded, and that we did not have the capacity to stop the spread of a virus like this.

The answer is hard to come to grips with: this was just too hard for us to figure out. Documentary films often simplify pretty complex issues. And therein lies the problem: if all of us are getting our information from splashy movies, we aren't getting good information. We must cross-reference everything we read and see with what our scientific communities are telling us. And we need to restore trust in our institutions.

If we don't face that challenge head-on, we aren't going to be successful in anything else we try to do as a society.