

Public Health Films Between 2016 and 2024; Reflections on Running an International Public Health Film Competition Through the Pandemic Years



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Abstract

The last decade has seen momentous developments in the worlds of public health and film, not least due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this period, the Public Health Film Society, a UK based charity has been running a bi-annual international public health film competition (IPHFC). This manuscript describes the submissions to the first 5 editions of the IPHFC between 2016-2024, including the aggregate scores provided by judges in each edition of the competition. We reflect on how the film submission have changed over the last decade, the effects of the pandemic on film submissions and opportunities for public health films moving into the future.

Keywords: Public Health; communication; film; pandemics

Abbreviations: IPHFC: International public health film competition

Introduction

Science and medicine have been highly significant subjects for film-makers. Scientific documentaries and films have helped to educate the general population about public health, and spread messages about advances in modern medicine during the 20th century [1].

In the 2000s, the centrality of scientific knowledge was increasingly being contested in debates around policy responses to global warming and claims of human complicity in the phenomenon. The relationship between science and the public was seen to be at a critical juncture [2]. A feature of this contestation in political debates and the news media was a limited understanding of the nature of science and of scientific discourse amongst the general public. However, it was believed that for science to retain democratic support, rectifying a deficit in public scientific knowledge would not suffice: engagement and dialogue between science and non-scientists' was essential [1].

Thus, in the 2010s there was a renaissance of interest in films about science and health with various initiatives focused on 'medical', 'global health' and 'public health' films being launched

[3]. During this time, the authors also launched their own not-for-profit organization, the Public Health Film Society (PHFS) that sought to 'bring together people from many different backgrounds, to encourage them to share their knowledge, skills, and experience, and be inspired through the medium of film to understand public health, and work'.

Since these initiatives have launched the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic saw a significant change in public awareness of science and a renewed focus on the relationship between science and the public [4, 5]. Throughout this period, the PHFS has been running the International Public Health Film Competition (IPHFC) from 2016 until 2024. This film competition has acted as an international showcase for health-related films over this crucial period in the history of public health.

The aim of this manuscript is to describe the films submitted to the five editions of the IPHFC, namely two editions prior to the pandemic (2016, 2018), two within the pandemic (2020, 2022) and one following the end of the pandemic (2024) to understand the breadth of films submitted during this time, the topics covered and the reception of these films in terms of scores attained in the competition.

Methods

The IPHFC has been described in a previous publication [3] and has been conducted bi-annually since 2016. The competition is open to film-makers from around the world, with each edition having a theme to encourage submissions on contemporary health issues. Call for submissions to each edition of the competition was open for 6 months and advertised through a number of channels including the PHFS website and social media platforms whose followers include practitioners, students and film-makers. We also emailed over 150 film schools globally to encourage submissions from students of film and placed advertisements on film festival platforms including Withoutabox.com, FilmFreeway.com and Reelport.com in order to appeal to established film-makers.

To encourage the widest participation in the competition, it has been free for film-makers to enter and all submissions were reviewed regardless of whether they covered issues related to the

theme of the competition. Submissions were received and viewed through an online platform which allowed the competition to continue virtually despite the lockdowns experienced worldwide during the pandemic [6]. Film-makers were encouraged to submit further written information with their films to describe the motivations and background to the production, the subsequent distribution and any evidence of evaluation of the film's impact.

Judging and scoring of submitted films was undertaken by an independent film selection committee of made up of film and public health experts who gave their time for free to view the films and decide on the competition award winners. Judges were asked to score the submitted films according to 10 equally weighted criteria see (Table 1) for a total score out of 100. 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 a competition winner.

Table 1: IPHFC judging criteria [3].

Criteria	Explanation	Points
Originality and creativity	The uniqueness and originality of the premise or story. Has film been used to highlight this health issue before? How does the film compare to others on the same subject? Does the film show an effective use of imagination to highlight the health issue?	10
Public health importance	Does the film address an important public health issue?	10
Plot and structure	Does the film convey a coherent public health message? And how does the story unfold? Do the scenes, actions, events, conflicts and turning points propel the story or central message of the film forward?	10
Pacing	How well timed are scenes in the film and unfolding of plot elements to the storyline or public health message?	10
Character and storyline	Are the personalities distinctive, compelling, multi-layered and unpredictable? Does the film accurately represent the facts around this public health issue?	10
Cinematography and direction	The quality of cinematography and direction demonstrated in the work	10
Entertainment value/ watchability	Has the film put across the public health message in a compelling way? Does the story keep the viewer's attention? It is fun, engaging or thought provoking?	10
Dialogue	Are the voices used in the film natural, succinct and unique to each character? Does the language used effectively reveal the characters and move the story forward?	10
Overall quality of production	Is the film well-constructed and well executed as a whole? Overall does this film contribute positively to the body of public health films?	10
Use and evaluation of impact	How has the film been creatively integrated into other public health programs on this issue? Is there evidence that the making/use or evaluation of this film would change public health practice?	10

Information on submitted films including film title, duration of the film, country of the submitter, judges' comments and scores was saved in a database held by the PHFS. All personal identifiers were removed and a dataset was made available for this study.

The mean film duration in minutes was calculated for each edition of the IPHFC along with the mean, median, mode and range of scores in each judging criteria for each edition. No qualitative analysis was undertaken of judges' comments.

Results

In total, over five editions of the IPHFC 5,368 films were sub-

mitted to the competition. (Table 2) showed that the number of films submitted to the IPHFC increased over time, peaking in 2020 with the 1,746 films submitted from 112 countries at the start of the pandemic. The mean duration of films submitted decreased over time with the mean length decreasing from 27.4 minutes to 14.3 minutes during the 3rd edition in 2020 before increasing again to 19.7 minutes by the 5th edition in 2024.

The total mean judging scores also decreased over time with mean total scores of 36.3 out of 100 (range 63) in 2016 to 23.2 out of 100 (range 77) during the 3rd edition in 2020 before increasing again to 27.5 out of 100 (range 79) by the 5th edition in 2024. No-

tably, the decrease scores during the 3rd edition in 2020 appear to result from decreases in scores across criteria related to the film

‘Plot and structure’, ‘Pacing’, and ‘Character/ storyline’.

Table 2: IPHFC Editions.

Edition	Year	Theme	No. of films submitted	No. of countries	Mean duration (mins)
1	2016	Health For All	84	20	27.4
2	2018	Growing Up Well	558	72	21.3
3	2020	Health and wellbeing in a pandemic: stories told through film	1,746	112	14.3
4	2022	Generation COVID: stories of public health told through film	1,464	100	18.2
5	2024	AI and Public Health	1,516	103	19.5

Combined with information on the reduced mean duration of films submitted during 2020, this would suggest that the increased number of films submitted to this edition of the IPHFC were drafted in response to the pandemic and film-makers had not had time to fully develop their scripts. Across all editions the scores under the criteria of ‘Use and evaluation of impact’ were very low, barely reaching an average of 1 out of 10 in any of the editions, suggesting that there is little evidence that the majority of films submitted to the IPHFC had been creatively integrated into other public health programs on this issue, or made use of

evaluation to see how the film would change public health practice.

Interestingly, the average scores under the criteria of ‘Public health importance’ halved over the five editions from 3.4 out of 10 to 1.7 out of 10. However, the range of scores under these criteria remained high, suggesting that the average scores under these criteria may have been diluted by the higher number of film submissions over time, many of which may not have addressed issues of public health importance. (Table 3)

Table 3: Judging scores (mean, median, mode and range).

Year	2016	2018	2020	2022	2024
Criteria					
Originality and creativity	3.7, 4, 4, 7	2.8, 2, 1, 8	2.3, 2, 1, 9	3.1, 3, 2, 9	3.1, 3, 3, 9
Public health importance	3.4, 3, 0, 9	1.6, 0, 0, 8	2.0, 0, 0, 9	2.3, 1, 0, 9	1.7, 0, 0, 9
Plot and structure	3.5, 2, 2, 9	2.2, 1, 0, 8	1.5, 1, 0, 9	2.2, 2, 1, 9	2.3, 2, 1, 9
Pacing	3.8, 3, 3, 9	2.5, 2, 0, 8	1.6, 1, 0, 9	2.2, 2, 1, 9	2.2, 2, 1, 9
Character and storyline	3.6, 3, 3, 9	2.5, 2, 1, 8	1.7, 1, 0, 9	2.3, 2, 1, 9	2.3, 2, 1, 9
Cinematography and direction	4.9, 5, 5, 7	4.2, 4, 5, 8	4.6, 5, 5, 8	4.8, 5, 5, 9	5.0, 5, 5, 9
Entertainment value/ watchability	3.6, 4, 4, 7	2.1, 1, 0, 8	1.3, 0, 0, 9	1.7, 1, 0, 9	1.8, 1, 0, 9
Dialogue	4.3, 5, 5, 8	5.3, 7, 7, 7	3.4, 4, 5, 9	3.8, 4, 0, 10	4.0, 5, 5, 9
Overall quality of production	4.8, 5, 5, 7	4.2, 4, 5, 8	4.6, 5, 5, 9	4.8, 5, 5, 9	5.0, 5, 5, 8
Use and evaluation of impact	0.6, 0, 0, 5	0.3, 0, 0, 6	0.1, 0, 0, 5	0.1, 0, 0, 4	0.2, 0, 0, 9
Total score out of 100	36.3, 34, 31, 63	27.2, 22, 19, 81	23.2, 19, 15, 77	27.2, 24, 20, 73	27.5, 25, 20, 79

Discussion

As far as the authors are aware, ours is the first study to review films submitted to a health-related film competition that spans a crucial period in the history of public health. We shed light on the films that were submitted during this time and the reaction to those films in the terms of judges’ scores across 10 criteria.

Our main findings are that the number of health films submitted to the IPHFC increased over time despite the onset of the pandemic, which had disrupted film production worldwide [7]. In fact, the number of films submitted was highest during the pandemic, although the average duration and overall quality of the films submitted was lower, especially as a result of lower scores relating to the ‘Plot and structure’, ‘Pacing’, and ‘Character/ storyline’ of the films.

Finally, our findings show that there was little evidence for the constructive use of health films to effect public health change or the evaluation of impact from health films submitted to the IPHFC. Thus, whilst there are many film-makers producing film related to health issues, few have been creatively integrated into other public health programs, or made use of evaluation to see how the film would change public health practice. This is a missed opportunity for film-makers and the public health community to collaborate.

Public interest in science in the UK and other countries is currently high and since the end of the pandemic studies have found

that trust in science and scientific evidence has increased overall, but that public attitudes have also become more polarized [5, 8, 9]. Film-makers are becoming increasingly important in raising public awareness of science and engendering trust in scientific evidence, including evidence related to health issues. Our research confirms that there has been a substantial and growing interest in health-related films over the last decade and there is an untapped potential for the public health community and film-makers to collaborate on the use of these films and their evaluation against public health priorities. (Table 4)

Table 4: IPHFC prize winners.

Edition	Year	Prize Winners
1	2016	Overall, Winner- 'Up for Air' by Navigo Productions Highly Commended- 'Code Therapy' by Divya Pathak Highly Commended- 'Aloha for Indo' by Lucas Visuals Highly Commended- 'Beyond Baby Blue' by White Boat TV
2	2018	Judges Prize- 'Buddy Joe' from JPL Films Judges Prize- 'Budh (Awakening)' from God's Own Motion Pictures Highly Commended- 'Lucy: Breaking the Silence' from Fact Not Fiction Films Highly Commended- 'Tayiya Kanasu' by Munmun Dhalaria Highly Commended- 'Hidden' from Shift.ms Highly Commended- '#HEAR ME' by Olga Arlauskas and Svetlana Gorlo Highly Commended- 'Lifelines' from Curious Cat Productions Highly Commended- 'Morte e Vida' by Milosz Zmijewski and Yves Itzek
3	2020	Overall, Winner- 'Manuel' by Javier Robles Álvarez Best COVID Film- 'Buonanotte (Goodnight)' by Yohana Ambros Honourable Mention- 'Mud Road' by Francesco De Giorgi Honourable Mention- 'Ernie & Joe: Crisis Cops' by Jennifer McShane
4	2022	Overall, Winner- 'A Fire Inside' by Justin Krook and Luke Mazzaferro Honourable Mention- 'Hysterical Sisters-A short film about Adenomyosis & Endometriosis' by Chiara Schreder Honourable Mention- 'Solstice' by Helen Newman Honourable Mention- 'A Black Cloud' by Emma Lazenby
5	2024	Overall, Winner- 'I'm Going Mad' by Matez Garci Highly Commended- 'There once was-There is no more-There is by Karina Paciorkowska and Łukasz Kamil Kamiński

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