

Exploring The Evolution Of Pandemic Narratives

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F.A.T.E (Fairness, Accountability, Transparency, and Ethics) Disclaimer For Potential Of Bias In This Paper: as of 03/09/2022

While all efforts have been made to write this paper objectively, this paper may contain the following biases: Identifies as a liberal US Citizen. Has conflict of interest with facebook. Believes that the incarcerated should have free high quality healthcare, access to academic education, that workers rights are human rights whether incarcerated or not, that bed guarantees are exploitative to prisoners, and a living wage should be paid for prison labor. Is against ageism. Has provided healthcare services through the IHSS.gov (In-Home Supportive Services) during the pandemic and has worked in elder advocacy within the US since 2010. Has industry background in behavioral targeting strategy.

Content Warning: if you have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, you may find this paper to be triggering.

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Introduction

The world was unprepared for Covid-19, a pandemic that quickly gave way to global disruption. Humans rapidly responded and adapted to unexpected events and changes in their environments as new narratives captured the world's attention. A narrative of uncertainty, fear, and panic followed by a narrative of distrust in experts, disinformation, and politically driven propaganda. Did the impacts of the pandemic cause our cultural narrative to rapidly evolve? Let's explore this further.



A scene from the 1995 film "Outbreak."

Culture and Film Narratives

Do we have Covid-19 narratives? If yes, were they already at play as part of our culture? In the beginning days and weeks of the 2020 Covid-19 global pandemic, fans of apocalyptic fiction films such as 28 Days Later (2002) and Outbreak (1995) most likely watched in horror as their favorite film fiction narratives came to life. Priscilla Wald (2008) coined "outbreak narrative" to explain apocalyptic film narratives and their impact not only on

the survival of the individual in times of crisis, but also on the survival of the masses, especially during the beginning stages of a pandemic. What is an apocalyptic fiction film narrative? Simply put, nothing good is to come of this; governments will topple, the economy will collapse, people will begin to loot businesses for supplies, buildings and neighborhoods will be abandoned, riots will break out in the streets during and after lockdowns. You will be separated from your families as the contaminated and the sick are forcefully sorted from the healthy. That the sick and contaminated are likely to die in a catastrophic manner, that they are dead already even though they are still living, that nothing can be done to save the infected or those who have come in contact with the infected, and you will never see your loved ones again. Unfortunately for many people around the world, the narrative horrors expressed in apocalyptic film fiction, were a chilling and accurate description of their real life experiences.

Screenshot of TagCrowd processed paragraph word frequency

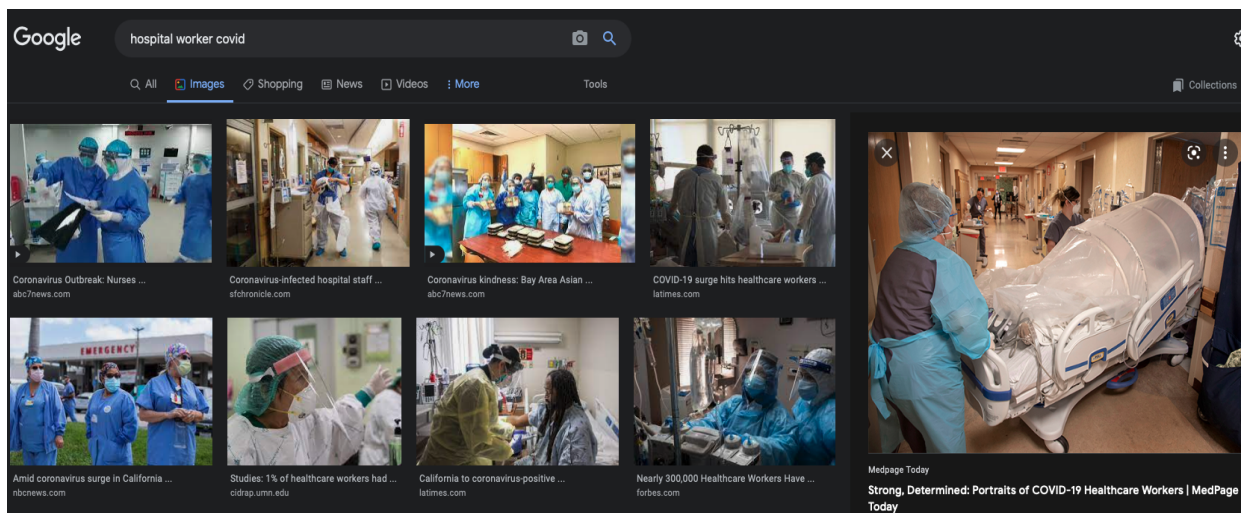


Culture And Social Media Narratives

Social media platforms have a plethora of narratives. Some are fun and happy, some are factual, some are fake, harmful, hateful, and or hurtful. During the pandemic any instance of narrative vagueness delivered by scientists, health practitioners, and or politicians, were vulnerable and subject to scrutiny across social media platforms such as Facebook or on

other news networks. Jim is a Facebook user who shared his pandemic narrative story with Joss at Vox Media (2022). Jim was hospitalized for Covid-19 and survived. This was a life changing event for Jim, and his story comes with two pandemic narratives that you may be familiar with. Prior to being hospitalized for Covid-19 Jim was anti-vaccination and also received the majority of his news narratives on Facebook and Fox news. Jim did what most people do after experiencing a life changing event, he shared his experience of survival on Facebook. His tune had changed, he was back to health, and his narrative had changed too; "I should have been listening to doctors and nurses and medical professionals instead of my political algorithms." Backlash ensued from Jim's Facebook friends across his profile as he no longer held true to his previous anti-vaccination narrative. This unusual narrative of backlash escalated to a narrative of aggression, which further escalated to Jim taking actions of blocking all communications with his aggressors and now former friends. Has a new narrative, a new social phenomenon developed due to the Covid's impact on citizens' attempt to sort through a narrative in flux?

Google Images: Google search hospital worker covid



Culture And Healthcare Narratives

Healthcare workers, in-home assistance providers, nurses, doctors and other essential workers have had a very difficult and different pandemic compared to those of us that were healthy and sheltered in

place. They dealt with “traumatic patient experiences,” unjust “distribution of effective personal protective equipment” (Heath, C., Sommerfield, A., & von Ungern-Sternberg, B. S. 2020) and anxiety, along with unhealthy working conditions as they placed themselves at risk of contracting Covid-19 daily. During the first few months of the pandemic many around the world were uncertain as to what Covid-19 was. A senior physician in an ICU expressed fear and uncertainty as she was constantly calling her “*colleagues in the country and around the world*” (Daphna-Tekoah S. 2020) for information or new insights. “Sharon, a nurse... *Corona—it is not extra work, it is completely different work,*” (Daphna-Tekoah S. 2020) as many healthcare workers were under constant fear and anxiety that they themselves would become infected or that they would infect loved ones or friends. “Golda, a nurse, described *the traumatic moments after a patient’s death*” (Daphna-Tekoah S. 2020) as horrifying, as she wrapped deceased patients in two body bags, instead of the usual one body bag that she was trained for and accustomed to.

Many healthcare workers underwent a change in their internal narrative voice as their “*You Voice, a voice that enabled the HCW’s (healthcare workers) to distance themselves from recurring exposure to traumatic and painful experiences,*” (Daphna-Tekoah S. 2020) rapidly evolved under the unusual circumstances of Covid-19 unknowns. Many shifted their internal narrative to adapt to the demanding and challenging changes within their environment, while continuing to function, and provide for strangers, as they themselves were under life threatening and uncertain circumstances.

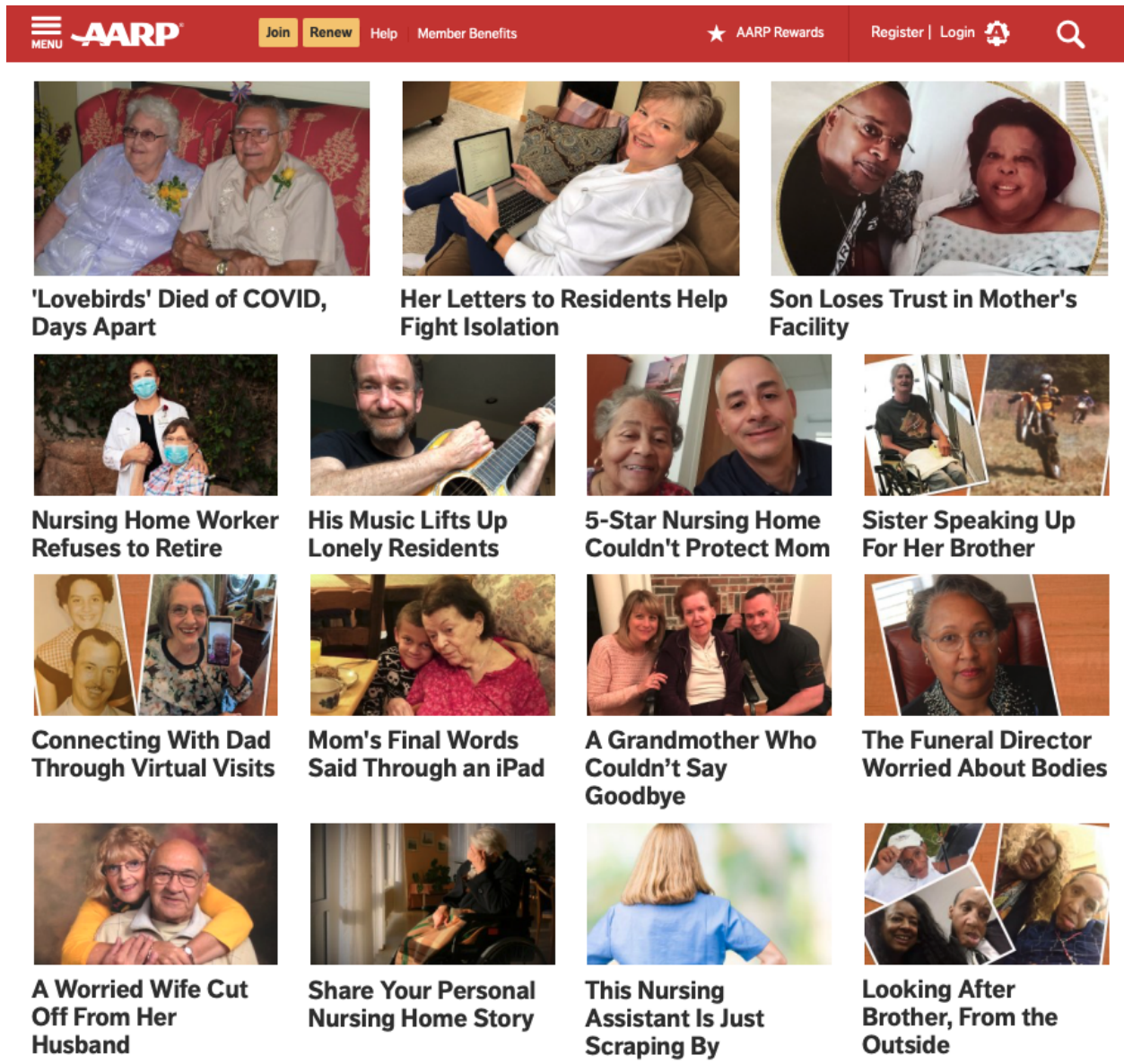


Illustration by Katherine Lam via The New York Times Magazine

Culture And Narratives Of The Incarcerated

“When Covid arrived in the United States... I was incarcerated in Westchester County, one of the pandemic’s first hot spots, at Sing Sing Correctional Facility” (John J. Lennon 2021). Prisoners did not have access to face masks as Covid surged at an unprecedented pace through prison facilities around the US. Inmates were not regularly tested for Covid and they were ineligible for the vaccine when it became available to the general public in the US. Some measures were taken to keep the infected separated from the general population, yet fellow inmates working directly with the infected, serving food and cleaning up garbage marked at the time as hazardous-waste, would return to the general population unvaccinated, and also without being tested. A narrative of less than undeserving of equal access to a life saving vaccine or “left without protection from infection” (John J. Lennon 2021) accompanied by a narrative of being punished led to

an overall narrative of depression, skepticism, fear, and uncertainty as inmates and officers passed away from Covid-19.



The screenshot shows the AARP website homepage with a red navigation bar at the top. The main content area features a grid of 12 article thumbnails, each with a small image and a headline. The headlines are: 'Lovebirds' Died of COVID, Days Apart; Her Letters to Residents Help Fight Isolation; Son Loses Trust in Mother's Facility; Nursing Home Worker Refuses to Retire; His Music Lifts Up Lonely Residents; 5-Star Nursing Home Couldn't Protect Mom; Sister Speaking Up For Her Brother; Connecting With Dad Through Virtual Visits; Mom's Final Words Said Through an iPad; A Grandmother Who Couldn't Say Goodbye; The Funeral Director Worried About Bodies; A Worried Wife Cut Off From Her Husband; Share Your Personal Nursing Home Story; This Nursing Assistant Is Just Scraping By; Looking After Brother, From the Outside.

Images from AARP website

Culture And Narratives within Nursing

Prison facilities were not the only facilities facing uncertainty as Covid spread across the globe. Nursing homes, their residents, residents' family members, and local funeral directors shared narratives of hope, grief, isolation, and disbelief. To capture narratives through headlines alone,

AARP headlines read: “Lovebirds' Died of COVID, Days Apart; Mom's Final Words Said Through an iPad; The Funeral Director Worried About Bodies; AARP Fights for Transparency in Care Facilities Amid Crisis”(AARP 2022). Family narratives changed as Covid aggressively spread through long term care facilities; *"I didn't want it to happen now, but I did want them to go together"* (Meyers 2021), Meyers speaking about their parents dying days apart. *"We were robbed. Mama was trapped in a petri dish, and we were shut out... Mama died alone, and my family will forever be scarred by this tragedy"* (Lolley 2020), Lonny and their family were unable to remove their mother from a nursing home while simultaneously being unable to visit her. *"Sometimes you have to walk away and sit in your office and cry because you're helpless"* (Williams 2020), Williams, a funeral home director and owner that felt unsafe bringing bodies into the funeral home from nursing home facilities since the cause of death was unknown, while simultaneously having friends and families returning to her funeral home either already grieving over a recent loss or returning among the deceased in a casket.

Not all narratives of the pandemic were ones of distress, sadness or anger. The Send-A-Note program, developed by a religious nonprofit organization specializing in senior care services, allowed anyone of the residents living in one of the 166 facilities with these chat services to have access to the program. Nursing home residents and the chat volunteers developed new narrative forms of communication to help cope with the isolation those faced inside and outside long term care facilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the way we lived our lives. Did everyone share the same pandemic narrative? The simple answer is no. Perhaps these changes in our daily routines, whether at work or at home, caused our cultural narrative to permanently evolve. And if the pandemic caused a rapid narrative evolution within culture, how often has this happened during human history and what are the impacts of long term narrative change on us and our actions? Do our words change us?

Citations and F.A.T.E.- Out of the references listed below, each one was used as a foundational narrative or read during the development of this written text by Selena Scola (3/2022), even though they may not have been used within the cited works.

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