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**ALTERNATIVE CREDIBILITY,
PHENOMENOLOGICAL EMPATHY, AND THE
PLANDEMIC: TRUST IN CONSPIRACY
THEORIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**Tarun Kattumana^a

Abstract

Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda behind COVID-19 is a twenty-six-minute film that went viral during the spring of 2020. The film invited controversy for sowing doubt in the official account of the COVID-19 pandemic by presenting an alternate perspective on several key issues such as masking, vaccines, and COVID-19 control measures. The film also vilified public health institutions and officials like Antony Fauci, among others. This paper aims to evaluate how conspiracy theories like the *Plandemic* find fertile ground during moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. To accomplish this the paper has two aims: (i) highlight the crucial role played by ‘alternative credibility’ and ‘empathy’ in garnering trust; (ii) identify how both concepts operate in the opening segment of the *Plandemic*, when the film’s protagonist Judy Mikovits is introduced in a manner that commentators claim played a crucial role in gaining the audience’s trust.

Keywords: Trust; Credibility; Empathy; Conspiracy Theories; COVID-19
Pandemic

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1. INTRODUCTION

Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda behind COVID-19 is a twenty-six-minute film that went viral during the spring of 2020. The film was uploaded on the 4th of May and was viewed more than 8 million times by the 11th of May (Naughton, 2020). Although platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Vimeo took the film down, it continued to spread and generate countless follow-up posts (Frenkel et al., 2020; Naughton, 2020). The label ‘conspiracy theory’ has been quickly, and widely applied to the *Plandemic*. Some have even argued that the film fulfills the quintessential criteria for a conspiracy theory (Cook et al., 2020; Haelle, 2020).

Conspiracy theories are often understood as attempts to make meaning when life feels radically contingent (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Although intended as a descriptive assessment, it can lead to dismissive readings. Richard Hofstadter, for instance, claims that there is a tendency among supporters of conspiracy theories to exhibit a “paranoid” style or “way of seeing the world and expressing oneself” (Hofstadter, 1996, p. 4). In the American context, Hofstadter notes that this paranoid style manifests as a “feeling of persecution” where one’s social group, cultural way of life, and nation-state are perceived to be under attack (Hofstadter, 1996, p. 4). However, other researchers have argued that it may be more fruitful to examine how and why people make certain meanings rather than dismiss them out of hand (Harambam, 2020). This paper takes the latter approach and does not evaluate the truth or falsity of *Plandemic*’s claims, a task that has been extensively undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the film’s release (Cook et al., 2020; Enserink & Cohen, 2020; Lytvynenko, 2020; Neuman, 2020; Newton, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020). Instead, this paper examines *how* the *Plandemic* assuaged feelings of persecution among right-leaning and conservative Americans to garner trust for its claims about corruption among public health officials and institutions.

The *Plandemic* received significant media and academic attention. These responses identified how the film took an anti-institutional perspective to sow doubt in the official public health account of the pandemic. This was accomplished by having the audience connect with the *Plandemic*’s protagonist Judy Mikovits, the conveyor of the film’s claims. However, the exact manner in which the film managed to get audience members to identify and relate with Mikovits is not sufficiently discussed. To address this gap, the paper undertakes a philosophical approach that employs the concepts of alternative credibility and empathy to elaborate *how* the film’s audience was able to connect with, and trust, Mikovits.

It is important to stress that the present philosophical treatment does not employ qualitative or quantitative research methodology. Building on existing philosophical research that distinguishes between trustworthiness (qualities that constitute a subject as worthy of trust) and credibility (perception of the subject’s said qualities), this paper follows Rebecca Lewis to identify the crucial role played by *alternative* credibility or credibility built upon one’s anti-institutional credentials (Lewis, 2018, 2020). This is supplemented by a phenomenological consideration of

empathy highlighting the underlying interchangeability of experience that enables subjects to co-experience a phenomenon. Both concepts are employed to offer a close reading of the transcript of the *Plandemic*'s opening segment, a section that commentators argue contributed to the audience trusting Mikovits (Haelle, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020). This allows the paper to highlight the crucial role played by alternative credibility and empathy in garnering trust among the film's audience.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first presents the immediate American context in which the *Plandemic* went viral. This includes a brief introduction to the film's claims along with a consideration of the uncertainty that characterized the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Section two elaborates on the important role that trust plays in supporting conspiracy theories. The third section distinguishes between trustworthiness and credibility to introduce the concept of alternative credibility. Section four puts forward a phenomenological consideration of empathy and its close association with alternative credibility. The fifth section employs both alternative credibility and empathy to offer a close reading of the opening segment of the *Plandemic*. The paper concludes by discussing possible objections to the claims put forward.

2. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF THE PLANDEMIC

The main feature of the *Plandemic* is a conversation between filmmaker Mikki Willis and the protagonist Judy Mikovits. During this conversation several claims are made that include, but are not limited to (Willis, 2020):

- i. Masks do not protect against the virus but activate it.
- ii. The flu vaccine makes one more susceptible to COVID-19.
- iii. Making vaccines mandatory is a money-making scheme.
- iv. Antony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) in the United States of America, is orchestrating a major cover-up for his own gain.
- v. That the virus was not naturally occurring but was manipulated and released from a laboratory.¹

Much of the immediate media response to the film sought to check *Plandemic*'s factual inaccuracies (Cook et al., 2020; Enserink & Cohen, 2020; Lytvynenko, 2020; Neuman, 2020; Newton, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020). Commentators argued that by releasing the film during the early phase of the pandemic, a period characterized by widespread uncertainty, the *Plandemic* built on public anxieties and presented alternative explanations that sowed doubt in the official account of the pandemic (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Haelle, 2020). In what follows,

¹ This issue became a point of contention as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to unfold. It is outside the scope of the present research to evaluate the truth or falsity of the *Plandemic*'s claims. Instead, this paper only focuses on presenting a philosophical proposal for how the film managed to garner trust.

I briefly consider the uncertainty and doubt that existed prior to the *Plandemic*'s release in the United States to evaluate how it contributed to the film's impact.

The early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic was an increasingly unpredictable period. Dave Altig and colleagues (2020, p. 8) note that most indicators of uncertainty reached their highest levels on record during this period. Pandemic-related questions about infectiousness and lethality of the virus, the time needed to develop and deploy vaccines, whether a second wave of the pandemic would emerge, duration and effectiveness of social distancing remained unclear at this time (Altig et al., 2020, p. 1). Uncertainty also extended beyond strictly COVID-19-related concerns. The early period of the pandemic saw increased psychological distress as a result of financial insecurity, job loss, and reductions in social contact following COVID-19 control measures to name a few (Robinson & Daly, 2020, p. 581). In the spring of 2020, when the *Plandemic* was released, anxiety and depression among adults in the United States was three times higher than it was in 2019 (Twenge & Joiner, 2020, p. 955). Some of these uncertainties grew in intensity with every passing month. Others receded to the background only to resurface on occasion and were experienced with different intensities depending on gender, race, class, and other social demographic parameters.

This period was also a time of acute political polarization in the United States (Donald Trump's impeachment trial, Democratic presidential primary). Such polarization spilled over onto the pandemic where partisan perspectives clashed over competing framings of COVID-19 control measures. Sheila Jasanoff and colleagues noted that right-leaning voices saw public health interventions as having "inflicted unwarranted economic damage and violated individual rights", while left-leaning voices largely supported COVID-19 control measures and blamed the pandemic's devastating consequences on "underreaction, irresponsible behavior, and rejection of science-based policy by conservatives" (Jasanoff et al., 2021, p. 108). The situation was exacerbated by Trump's rhetoric that downplayed the severity of the pandemic and pitted 'the people' against a group of experts, elites, and public institutions (Gugushvili et al., 2020; Kattumana & Byrne, 2023, pp. 221–222; Lasco, 2020, p. 1418,1422–1423; Sabahelzain et al., 2021, pp. 93–94).

The uncertainty, psychological distress, and polarization during the pandemic's early phase was "fertile ground" for conspiracy theories to develop and become "widespread" (Freeman et al., 2022, p. 262; Romer & Jamieson, 2020, p. 6; Uscinski et al., 2020, p. 6). The *Plandemic* built upon this fertile ground to become a viral phenomenon (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Enserink & Cohen, 2020; Frenkel et al., 2020; E. Gallagher, 2020; Kearney et al., 2020; Lytvynenko, 2020; Naughton, 2020). The film had a major impact on online activity, especially Twitter, and influenced discourse in a manner that allowed for convergence between, and helped fuel, other conspiracies that demonized public health institutions and figures like Antony Fauci and Bill Gates. In doing so, the *Plandemic* actively leveraged right-leaning discontent toward the official public health narrative. Moreover, the film's producers openly asked that the *Plandemic*

be downloaded and distributed on other platforms to “bypass the gatekeepers of free speech” (Nazar & Pieters, 2021, p. 2). Such rhetoric resonated with right-leaning sentiments and resulted in widespread sharing by groups like Reopen America, which was working to end stay-at-home measures, as well as other groups with links to the QAnon conspiracy theories, conservative politicians, and media personalities (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Frenkel et al., 2020; Nazar & Pieters, 2021, p. 9). DiResta and Garcia-Camargo mention that some liberal and left-leaning groups also shared *Plandemic*-related material (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020).

Another reason for the film’s appeal was the professional way it was produced and its use of documentary style conventions (lighting, pacing, and camera angles) that have broadly come to be associated with conveying factual information (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Haelle, 2020; Nazar & Pieters, 2021, p. 2). Some commentators noted how this played a part in the film garnering trust and contributed to Mikovits’ poise and authoritative tone. Jane Lytvynenko noted that “[u]nlike other conspiracy theorists, who can shout or ramble, Mikovits is composed and speaks calmly. Her air of reasonable cadence is bolstered by selective clips from news reports and an interviewer who appears curious and sympathetic” (Lytvynenko, 2020). Particular emphasis has been placed on the opening ten minutes when Mikovits is introduced. In terms of temporal division, this opening introductory segment amounts to more than one third of the film. Beth Skwarecki notes that by the end of this introduction and before Mikovits even begins to speak about COVID-19, “we’ve gotten to know her and we’re on her side” (Skwarecki, 2020). As Tara Haelle argues, “the only purpose of the first 8-10 minutes [of *Plandemic*] is get the audience to trust Mikovits” (Haelle, 2020). This trust is achieved by Mikovits narrating “a personal story that helps viewers connect with her” (Haelle, 2020). Before philosophically examining how the introductory segment and the *Plandemic*’s presentation of Mikovits’ personal story was able to garner trust, I briefly discuss trust as it relates to conspiracy theories.

3. TRUST AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Kyle Whyte and Robert Crease define trust as “deferring with comfort and confidence to others, about something beyond our knowledge or power, in ways that can potentially hurt us” (Whyte & Crease, 2010, p. 412). This definition highlights the vulnerabilities of trusting. Trust does not come with absolute guarantees and is inherently tied to the possibility of betrayal, an issue that is often considered essential to any account of trust (Holton, 1994, pp. 66–67; Kattumana, 2022, pp. 648–649; Ozar, 2018, p. 149; Petranovich, 2019, p. 134). But despite this, trust is an ever-present feature of daily life because it helps reduce the complexity of decision-making, in turn resulting in certain courses of action becoming possible (Larson et al., 2018, p. 1599; Luhmann, 2017, p. 25). Trusting those we live with allows us to leave the house without fear for our belongings.

Balancing the vulnerabilities of trusting with the associated benefits of reduced complexity represents the dilemma that underlies any act of trust. Extending the discussion to trust in conspiracy theories, I first consider the benefits of reduced complexity before elaborating on the vulnerabilities of trust.

Trust in conspiracy theories like the *Plandemic* reduces the complexity of decision making. Conspiracy theories provide explanations that limit uncertainties, restore a sense of security, all the while elevating the concerns of one's social group (Douglas, 2021, pp. 270–272; Freeman et al., 2022, p. 252). As discussed previously, Mikovits' claims were shared and endorsed by individuals/groups who were predominantly right-leaning. The film achieves this by drawing on tropes associated with “white victimhood”, that emerged in the United States during the 1970s and 80s, stressing the need to protect personal freedoms against restrictive public health interventions during the pandemic (Prasad, 2021, p. 7). This follows a general trend where belief in conspiracy theories during the pandemic saw reduced compliance with, or opposition to, COVID-19 control measures (Douglas, 2021, p. 271; Freeman et al., 2022, p. 262; Romer & Jamieson, 2020, p. 2). In other words, the *Plandemic* limits the confusions of an increasingly uncertain period by providing explanations that reassure those who remained unconvinced by the official public health narrative.

The benefits of reduced complexity help situate support for conspiracy theories, both generally and during the pandemic. But complications arise when discussing the vulnerabilities associated with trust in conspiracy theories. As previously noted, trust does not come with absolute guarantees and is closely associated with the possibility of betrayal. Supporters of conspiracy theories, however, do not seem to exhibit the feeling of being betrayed when shown evidence to the contrary. For instance, the *Plandemic* has been fact-checked on numerous occasions highlighting the many inaccuracies in Mikovits' claims. But these findings do not seem to result in feelings of betrayal among Mikovits supporters (Haelle, 2020; Nazar & Pieters, 2021). Instead, in many cases, advocates of a conspiracy theory are seen to double down on their support or shift allegiance to another conspiracy theory making comparable claims (Cook et al., 2020; Douglas, 2021, p. 272; Ichino & Rääkkä, 2020, p. 7).

This perceived lack of vulnerability could be explained by drawing attention to the distinction between trust and belief. The lack of guarantees associated with trust implies a certain degree of uncertainty. Consequently, underlying trust is the hope that those we are trusting will not let us down (Marín-Ávila, 2021, p. 241). But this is not the case with beliefs. There is a high degree of certainty associated with beliefs. Those holding beliefs tend to exhibit a sense of confidence that overlooks the possibility of disappointment because such a possibility is perceived to be unlikely (Luhmann, 1988, p. 97). Supporters of conspiracy theories complicate this neat distinction and express their trust in terms of belief. Anna Ichino and Juha Rääkkä argue that a “meta-cognitive mistake” occurs where the advocate of a conspiracy theory “does not believe, but rather merely hopes, that the

theory is true; but she mistakenly takes her hope to be a belief” (Ichino & Rääkkä, 2020, p. 8). This does not, however, mean that those supporting conspiracy theories have no beliefs whatsoever. More general beliefs pertaining to the untrustworthiness of public institutions or the system continue to be at play (Ichino & Rääkkä, 2020, p. 8). In this regard, support for conspiracy theories represents an indirect way to signal or express a firm belief that public institutions are not trustworthy (Ichino & Rääkkä, 2020, p. 10).

The suspicion that public institutions are elaborately faking an appearance of trustworthiness is a significant feature of contemporary conspiracy culture (Aupers, 2012, p. 24). In the case of science, close collaboration with external influences like industry and politics sits uneasily with, and does not live up to, the idealized public image of scientific institutions as being detached and objective (Harambam, 2020, p. 197). Furthermore, support for conspiracy theories are often “politically loaded” and can be correlated to their “position on the spectrum between left and right” (Douglas & Sutton, 2015, p. 101). During the pandemic, research shows that right-leaning individuals and groups closely following conservative media were more likely to support conspiracy theories (Douglas, 2021, p. 272; Romer & Jamieson, 2020, p. 6). This is not surprising as Gordon Gauchat notes that conservatives and those who frequently attend church in the United States show long-term declines in trust in science since the 1970s (Gauchat, 2012, p. 182). However, Gauchat stresses that reduced trust in science cannot be attributed to lower levels of education as is often presumed. Educated conservatives were also seen to have decreasing trust in science and its institutions (Gauchat, 2012, p. 182).

Distrust of scientific institutions and right-leaning ideology might explain the *Plandemic*'s appeal among the film's intended audience, but it does not speak to the film's ability to frame Mikovits as a trustworthy source. How does the opening introductory segment where Mikovits narrates her personal story get the audience acquainted with, and trusting, her version of events (Haelle, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020)? To elaborate on how the film manages to cast Mikovits as worthy of trust, I briefly consider the distinction between trustworthiness and credibility to introduce alternative credibility.

4. TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ALTERNATIVE CREDIBILITY

According to John Hardwig, trustworthiness concerns the “moral and epistemic qualities” or “character” traits that indicate a person is worthy of trust (Hardwig, 1991, p. 700). Concerned with trust among scientific researchers, Hardwig lists honesty, competence in a specific domain, conscientiousness, and the ability to epistemically self-assess oneself adequately as traits indicating trustworthiness (Hardwig, 1991, p. 700). However, the emphasis on character traits and their purported correspondence with trustworthiness has been criticized. Kristina Rolin questions Hardwig's underlying assumption that a researcher's character traits are transparent to others. Assuming such transparency fails to take into account that

the perception of these traits are often mediated, for instance, by prejudiced and biased institutional evaluation (Rolin, 2002, p. 105). For Rolin, this oversight results from conflating trustworthiness (a researcher's moral and epistemic qualities) with credibility (perception of the researcher's said qualities) (Rolin, 2002, pp. 96, 100). Citing both historical and recent research on institutional sexism, Rolin highlights that a researcher could be trustworthy without being recognized as such owing to their lack of credibility (Rolin, 2002, pp. 102–111).

The mismatch between trustworthiness and credibility can also move in the opposite direction. Credibility could be framed in a manner that indicates trustworthiness even though this may not be the case (Fricker, 1998, p. 167). Something similar is seen to occur with right-leaning voices aiming to gain a following online. Rebecca Lewis examines the kind of credibility mobilized by right-leaning micro-celebrities, or personalities on the internet who use self-presentation techniques that mobilize strategic intimacy to appeal to their niche audiences (Lewis, 2018, pp. 16–21, 2020, pp. 3–4; 12–13). Such credibility, and its intended appearance of trustworthiness, is *alternative* because the intention is never to meet institutional standards of reputation or ideals of objectivity (Lewis, 2020, p. 12). Rather, unlike credibility discussed thus far which seeks to operate within the bounds of institutional norms, alternative credibility is openly anti-institutional.

The anti-institutional character of alternative credibility is garnered through the performance of three qualities (Lewis, 2018, pp. 17–20). Given the immediate application of these qualities to the film and Mikovits, I only consider the first two qualities (relatability and authenticity) and not the third (accountability).² *Relatability* refers to the manner in which micro-celebrities heighten their appeal by presenting themselves as accessible and being just like those in the audience, unlike mainstream and legacy media outlets whose appeal is based on institutional credibility and reputation (Lewis, 2018, pp. 17–18). *Authenticity* concerns openness and a highly personal relationship with the audience established through affective storytelling techniques (Lewis, 2018, pp. 18–19). This differs from the mainstream media who establish their expertise by maintaining a degree of separation from the audience, emphasizing their institutional neutrality.

Achieving relatability and authenticity is the purpose of the *Plandemic's* introductory segment, which commentators argue contributed to the audience trusting Mikovits (Halle, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020). This part of the film sees the

² Accountability, as it refers to micro-celebrities, concerns the attempt to invite increased audience participation through feedback and likes, all while stressing the importance of such participation for content creation. The manner of said participation concerns context-specific factors of the social media landscape that do not immediately apply to the *Plandemic*. For instance, accountability would require sustained interaction with the audience. Such interaction allows for repeated instances where a micro-celebrity can ask for increased audience involvement and request likes. However, Mikovits did not have a continued and sustained relationship with the *Plandemic's* audience after the film's release, except for a couple of interviews. Therefore, the opportunities for repeatedly emphasizing and inviting audience participation did not occur.

use of self-presentation techniques that frame Mikovits as being *relatable* and personal storytelling which makes her perspective appear *authentic*. However, the precise manner in which these two qualities operate requires elaboration. Further analysis is needed to explain how the effective mobilization of relatability and authenticity can grant the appearance of trustworthiness. For this reason, I consider the relation between alternative credibility, empathy, and trust which in turn sets up the theoretical framework to examine the introductory segment of the *Plandemic*.

Before proceeding it is important to stress that the philosophical analysis in the next section draws upon phenomenological philosophy. Authenticity is a much discussed and complex phenomenological notion most prominently found in Martin Heidegger's works. Lewis' use of authenticity does not speak to its phenomenological meaning but concerns a strategically mobilized personal relationship characterized by affectively laden story-telling techniques. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the second quality associated with alternative credibility as *strategic storytelling* to avoid conflation with the phenomenological notion of authenticity.

5. EMPATHY, TRUST, AND ALTERNATIVE CREDIBILITY

Empathy has often been conflated with sympathy, or the feeling of compassion for another person. However, phenomenological considerations of empathy differ significantly in this regard.³ According to Edmund Husserl, empathy refers to instances where “the empathizing I experiences the inner life (*Seelenleben*) or ... the consciousness of the other I” (Husserl, 2006, p. 82). The inner life (emotions, memories, affective states) of another subject is not perceivable or directly experience-able like an object (Husserl, 2006, p. 83). Instead, empathy concerns an intentional directedness towards the other's lived experiences on the basis of an embodied and shared inter-subjective experience of the world. This underlying shared experience enables the subject to experience the other as having the same experience that “I should have if I should go over there and be where he is” (Husserl, 1960, p. 117). In other words, the phenomenological conception of empathy refers to the *potential* interchangeability of standpoints. The emphasis placed on potentiality serves to stress that empathy does not entail literally taking the place of the other and embodying their experiences as if they were my own. To clarify the

³ Empathy is also incorrectly discussed in relation to the ‘argument from analogy’ associated with the problem of other minds. The argument from analogy follows the subject's observation that certain behavior or action is closely correlated with certain experiences. Consequently, if the other were exhibiting the same behavior or action, then the subject can infer by analogy that the other was having the same associated experience. However, the phenomenological approach proceeds differently as empathy *does not occur in stages*. Empathy, phenomenologically conceived, does not begin with purely physical behavior, and then infer an associated subjective experience. Rather, the other is immediately experienced as an embodied subject. See Gallagher & Zahavi (2010, pp. 181–183) for a brief consideration of this issue.

specific sense of interchangeability at play, I will discuss the close relation between empathy and relatability.

The phenomenological conception of empathy represents a condition for relatability, and alternative credibility by extension, to be achieved. To appear relatable, right-leaning influencers do not present themselves in terms of institutional success or professional track record. Rather, following Erin Duffy, Lewis notes that to be relatable micro-celebrities try to “disavow” status markers that would set them apart to claim that they are “just like” their audience (Lewis, 2018, p. 17). Such disavowal increases the possibility of the audience relating with the micro-celebrity. Similarly, if the *Plandemic* aims to be relatable, Mikovits needs to be presented in such a way that the audience relates with her perspective. The film’s intended audience must feel that that Mikovits is ‘just like’ them. Phenomenologically speaking, this entails emphasizing that Mikovits and her audience share a common experience of the world. This would enable the audience to feel that if they were to potentially take Mikovits’ standpoint, they would have similar experiences. In other words, relatability presupposes the potential interchangeability of experience that Husserl highlights is crucial for empathy. Here interchangeability does not involve the *Plandemic*’s audience literally substituting themselves in place of Mikovits. Rather, efforts to appear relatable aim to show the preexistence of a concordance between Mikovits’ experiences and that of her audience. The close association between empathy, relatability, and concordant experiences can be further elaborated by considering implications of the current discussion for trust.

Operating in a non-phenomenological vein, Olivia Bailey provides a similar⁴ perspective on empathy and points to its close relationship with trust. For Bailey, empathy involves “using one’s imagination to ‘transport’ oneself, and more particularly that it involve[s] considering the other’s situation as though one were occupying the other’s position” (Bailey, 2018, p. 143). Transporting oneself or occupying the other’s position echoes the Husserlian emphasis that empathy implies a potential inter-changeability of experiences. Following Bailey, we can extend Husserl’s phenomenological insight towards trust by noting that in transporting myself to another’s situation there is an implicit assessment of whether the other’s experience is plausible or not. This assessment of plausibility is based on our emotionally colored experience of the world, which is often uncritically taken at face value to stand for a default experience of the world (Bailey, 2018, p. 146). Hence when I empathize with another person, the other’s experience has passed

⁴ Non-phenomenological approaches to empathy tend to focus on the more evident or active dimension of empathy. Phenomenological approaches tend to supplement the active dimension of empathy with an analysis of the underlying passive dimension. The passive dimension involves consideration of time consciousness, associations, structures of fulfillment, and anticipations among others. See Husserl (2001), especially Part 2, for more on the passive dimension of conscious life. By claiming that Bailey’s non-phenomenological perspective is similar to Husserl, I argue that her account presupposes and implicitly builds upon a passive analysis.

this assessment of plausibility. This is possible because it correlates with what I take to be in keeping with my experience of the world. As Husserl argues, when we empathize the “things posited by others are also mine: in empathy I participate in the other’s positing” (Husserl, 1989, p. 177). When empathizing we are transporting ourselves into the other’s position thereby imaginatively taking part in their account of the events. When this account strongly correlates with our own emotionally colored experience of the world, Bailey argues we trust the other’s perspective because it “is extremely difficult if not impossible to dismiss them as wholly inappropriate” (Bailey, 2018, p. 148).

Trust based on empathy, however, has limits. The test of plausibility does not imply literally or actively transporting oneself to embody another. Rather, it is an imaginative attempt that depends on the extent to which the subjects in question have a strong concordance between their respective emotionally colored experience of the world. Similarly, as already noted, the interchangeability of standpoints underlying phenomenological empathy does not entail a subject literally or actively taking the position of the other and experiencing the world as they do. Instead, it concerns a perceptual leap where one considers what it may be like if I were to live through what the other is experiencing; a leap that depends on a shared embodied experience of the world. This highlights the need to distinguish between at least three levels of empathy (Husserl, 1973, p. 435): i) recognizing the other as an active embodied corporeal subject capable of interpreting, attending to, and comprehending the environment; ii) apprehending the other’s actions at a “lower layer” in terms of bodily comportment;⁵ iii) recognizing the purposefulness of the other’s actions. If I were empathizing with a conductor leading an orchestra, my extremely limited understanding of western classical music would imply that empathy occurs at the first and second levels. I empathize with the conductor as an embodied other who acts based on a particular interpretation, attention, and comprehension of their environment. However, empathy at the third level does not occur as I do not understand the purposefulness of the conductor’s hand movements. In other words, I do not fully comprehend what the conductor’s hand movements has achieved, or intends to achieve, in relation to other musicians in the orchestra. This example serves to emphasize that achieving the first two levels of empathy is not sufficient for a rich interpersonal understanding of the other’s actions. These clarifications have implications for the present discussion of trust. Adequately accomplishing empathy requires a pre-existing correlation between subjects and their emotionally colored experience of the world. I need to understand the conventions of western classical music to fully empathize with the conductor. Similarly, without a shared understanding of conventions and intra-group associations, the potential to empathize as it pertains to trust is compromised.

⁵ The following line builds on a translation of the German text which reads as follows: “Ein Zweites ist dann das Handeln in einer Unterschichte, nämlich das in die rein körperliche Natur als solche hineinwirkende Handeln” (Husserl, 1973, p. 435). I thank Gregor Bös for checking my translation.

This highlights the importance of the second quality of alternate credibility: strategic storytelling. In the case of right-leaning micro-celebrities, strategic storytelling sees said influencers interacting directly with the audience, being increasingly transparent about their lives and content-making process (Lewis, 2020, p. 5). The intention behind appearing transparent is to further buttress relatability and emphasize that these influencers are just like their audience, setting up the appearance of a concordance between the influencer and an audience's default experience of the world. When successful, the audience can feel like they have been transported into micro-celebrity's world as part of their inner circle. Mikovits is not a micro-celebrity but commentators note that the *Plandemic's* opening segment puts forward an increasingly personal story to help viewers connect with, and trust, Mikovits' version of events (Haelle, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020). As will be discussed in the next section, Mikovits' personal story paints a highly negative picture of the inner workings of public health institutions. This makes transparent what occurs behind the scenes of institutions that are opaque to the *Plandemic's* intended audience. The film's negative portrayal of public health personalities and institutions is in keeping with right-leaning discontent towards said institutions. Such a portrayal confirms their suspicions and potentially results in Mikovits' account seeming plausible. Therefore, Mikovits and the audience are shown to have a similar negative experience with public health institutions and its prominent figures. This shared experience is then leveraged to achieve empathy and allows the audience the empathic possibility of being transported into Mikovits' world and potentially trusting her version of events.

In the next section, I will closely follow the opening segment of the *Plandemic* to highlight how the film evokes empathy by mobilizing relatability through strategic storytelling to garner alternative credibility, bestowing upon Mikovits, and her claims, the appearance of trustworthiness.

6. EMPATHY, ALTERNATIVE CREDIBILITY, AND JUDY MIKOVITS

The initial ten minutes of the *Plandemic* plays a key role in making the audience trust Mikovits (Haelle, 2020; Skwarecki, 2020). To examine how this is accomplished, this section considers how the two qualities of alternative credibility (relatability and strategic storytelling), and underlying empathic possibilities are mobilized to grant Mikovits the appearance of trustworthiness. The film begins with the following voice over introducing Mikovits:

Dr. Judy Mikovits has been called one of the most accomplished scientists of her generation. Her 1991 doctoral thesis revolutionized the treatment of HIV AIDS. At the height of her career, Dr. Mikovits published a blockbuster article in the journal *Science*. The controversial article sent shockwaves to the scientific community, as it revealed that the common use of animal and human fetal tissues were unleashing devastating plagues of chronic diseases for exposing their deadly

secrets. The minions of Big Pharma waged war on Dr. Mikovits, destroying her good name, career, and personal life. Now, as the fate of nations hang in the balance, Dr. Mikovits is naming names of those behind the plague of corruption that places all human life in danger (Willis, 2020).

The voice over positions Mikovits as a revolutionary scientist. Such institutional credentials and monumental success, as noted previously, by itself may not portray Mikovits as relatable; especially among *Plandemic's* intended audience. But this is immediately followed by a series of disavowals. Her research is claimed to have sent 'shockwaves to the scientific community' and 'exposing their deadly secrets'. Furthermore, Mikovits' work has allegedly invited the ire of the scientific establishment, in particular big pharmaceutical companies thereby casting her as a whistle-blower challenging institutional malpractice (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Lytvynenko, 2020). The film's opening highlights its intention to frame Mikovits as an expert who is knowledgeable about issues relating to public health. But her expertise is not framed in terms of institutional credibility. Instead, Mikovits is portrayed as an anti-institutional outsider. The conversation that follows reiterates this implicit framing in an explicit fashion (Willis, 2020):

Willis: So, you made a discovery that conflicted with the agreed upon narrative.

Mikovits: Correct [nervous laugh].

Willis: And for that, they did everything in their powers to destroy your life.

Mikovits: Correct.

Willis: You were arrested?

Mikovits: Correct.

These disavowals of institutional credibility are coupled with a portrayal of Mikovits as a victim of public health officials and institutions. Immediately following the above exchange is a discussion of an alleged gag order. According to Mikovits, the heads of major public health institutions colluded to destroy her reputation and told her that if she were to break her silence "they would find new evidence and put me back in jail. And it was one of the few times I cried it was because I knew there was no evidence" (Willis, 2020).

Throughout the opening segment, and before a single claim has been made about the COVID-19 pandemic, public health institutions are discussed in nefarious terms. This overall negative characterization is exemplified by Antony Fauci, who is accused of being untrustworthy and deliberately spreading propaganda that benefits him and the institutions that he works for. Mention is made of conflicts of interest that are overlooked, further indicating an institutional culture of corruption in public health institutions. The example that holds these allegations together is a personal one. Fauci is accused of deliberately sabotaging

Mikovits' research relating to HIV/AIDS. This research is claimed to have had the potential to save lives and prevent the devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic. The allegations against Fauci are further buttressed with a clip of writer Larry Kramer calling Fauci "the Bernie Madoff of science", which Bernadette Jaworsky calls the *mise-en-scène* of the *Plandemic* (Jaworsky, 2021, p. 13; Willis, 2020). Other villains in the *Plandemic* narrative include Robert Redfield, the head of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], who is accused of colluding with Fauci, and Bill Gates to allegedly orchestrate a worldwide conspiracy.

Contrary to much of the immediate response to the film, these opening exchanges show that the film does not *position itself* as anti-science. Rather, the film's criticism is aimed at institutional corruption and the alleged fabrication of evidence. Mikovits is presented as an honest whistle-blower calling out the system. She repeatedly emphasizes that institutions (CDC, NIAID) and public figures (Fauci, Redfield, Gates) playing a key role in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic are corrupt. The film argues that they have a history of fabricating evidence, mismanaging earlier crises (HIV AIDS epidemic), and using their power to oppress Mikovits. This institutional criticism acts as a launch pad for the more controversial claims of the film. Amit Prasad argues that a reified construction of scientific objectivity and value-neutrality of science is used by the *Plandemic* as scaffolding to make anti-scientific claims (Prasad, 2021, p. 5).

A case in point is Mikovits' claims about vaccines during the film's opening segment. When asked if her anti-institutional views make her an anti-vaccine advocate, Mikovits responds "absolutely not, vaccine is immune therapy. Just like interferon alpha is immune therapy. So I'm not anti-vaccine. My job is to develop immune therapies. That's what vaccines are" (Willis, 2020). These assurances are used as scaffolding to make other claims. For instance, during an exchange with Willis, Mikovits asserts that there is currently no effective vaccine against RNA viruses (Willis, 2020). Furthermore, Mikovits raises the stakes of compliance with public health recommendations noting that vaccines would kill millions and argues that mandatory vaccinations are in essence a money making scheme (Willis, 2020). Another instance of raising the stakes to oppose public health control measures occurs towards the end of the introductory segment, before moving to discuss the pandemic. Willis asks Mikovits why she is stepping forward now to expose unjust schemes, especially given the power of those she is fighting. Mikovits responds: "[b]ecause if we don't stop this now, we can not only forget our republic and our freedom, but we can forget humanity because we'll be killed by this agenda" (Willis, 2020). The agenda being discussed is that of Fauci and major public health institutions. Mikovits berates Fauci for spreading lies during the pandemic: "[w]hat he's saying is absolute propaganda, and the same kind of propaganda that he perpetrated to kill millions since 1984" (Willis, 2020). By repeating the link between Fauci's personal interests that allegedly lead to the mishandling of the AIDS epidemic, Mikovits raises the possibility that the same thing will occur during the COVID-19 pandemic.

By framing Mikovits as a victim of public health institutions, Jaworsky notes that the film seeks to “achieve psychological identification and cultural extension with the audience” (Jaworsky, 2021, p. 19). These attempts to have the audience identify with Mikovits rely on her being ‘just like’ those feeling victimized by powerful forces within public health institutions. In other words, Mikovits and her audience share a similar relationship with public health institutions, which makes her relatable thereby increasing empathic possibilities. This is further bolstered by Mikovits’ strategic storytelling which is highly personal and loaded with affective cues; stimulating a sense of intimacy with her, as she recounts feeling helpless in her fight against unjust public health authorities. Prasad argues that framing Mikovits as a victim allows the film to orchestrate an “alignment of interests” between her and those among the audience who are feeling victimized by the same institutions and public figures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Prasad, 2021, pp. 7–8). Mikovits’ account passes the assessment of plausibility for the *Plandemic*’s audience, the bulk of whom were American conservatives disgruntled by the official public health narrative during the pandemic’s early phase. For these reasons, I argue that Mikovits’ reliability and strategic storytelling made her account seem plausible thereby setting up empathic possibilities, potentially garnering alternative credibility for the *Plandemic*’s audience to trust her account.

7. EMPATHY ONLINE AND JUDY MIKOVITS’ ALTERNATIVE CREDIBILITY

Before concluding, further clarification is needed to justify extending empathy towards trust garnered through alternative credibility. These clarifications serve to further substantiate the claims made thus far.

Traditionally, phenomenological analyses of empathy emphasize face-to-face interaction where we can witness the other’s experience in-person.⁶ Such interaction is embodied and experientially rich given the direct back and forth with the other, which has been argued is crucial to empathic experiences. Discussing empathy in the case of the *Plandemic* would then seem like a dead-end as the audience’s relationship with Mikovits is technologically mediated and therefore does not have the benefits of in-person interaction. In what follows, I question the negative characterizations of technologically mediated interactions by stressing the phenomenological distinction between the physical body and the living body.

Husserl argues that the “physical body and living body [*Körper und Leib*] are essentially different” (Husserl, 1970, p. 107). The physical body (*Körper*) refers to the body as object, i.e., it’s standardized physical attributes such as color, weight, or height. By contrast, the living body (*Leib*) refers to the body as subject, i.e., one’s

⁶ Part of the reason for this emphasis is that Husserl is trying to articulate the most basic mode of empathy which occurs at the level of implicitly/passively ‘understanding’ the other as an embodied subject. As will be seen in this section, such an emphasis does not preclude the more complex or mediated modes of empathetic experience.

unique experience of their own body from the first-person perspective. By emphasizing face-to-face encounters, the traditional literature on empathy conflates the living body with the physical body. According to Lucy Osler, such conflation “can be attributed to the trend of talking about being able to ‘see’ someone’s experiences,” thus forgetting that the living body “extends beyond the skin” (Osler, 2021, p. 8).

If Osler is correct, then empathy is no longer restricted to face-to-face interactions making it more applicable to cases like the *Plandemic*. However, three potential objections persist. The first two are posed and responded to by Osler in making a phenomenological case for empathy online, while the third questions the possibility of empathy given the particularities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first objection notes that by allowing for empathy at a distance, the rich experiential nuances of face-to-face interaction are lost. Osler’s response broadly follows her example that getting extremely close to the other’s mouth does not help in empathically experiencing their smile (Osler, 2021, p. 21). The adequate distance for empathy is then recast as a context-dependent issue. While the interaction between Mikovits and her audience is technologically mediated, I argue that it does not limit empathic possibilities. The lack of face-to-face interaction is substituted for a well-crafted documentary style film-making techniques with timely pauses, close ups, images, and statements that only serve to buttress Mikovits’ claims. All this allows for Mikovits’ strategic storytelling to be presented in a relatable fashion and activates the underlying inter-changeability of empathic experiences. This results in the audience being privy to, and co-experiencing, Mikovits’ narrative of organized institutional persecution.

A second objection could be raised that technologically mediated interactions come with a time-delay, which undermines the often-emphasized point that empathy refers to one’s *present* experience of another’s *present* experience (Osler, 2021, p. 22).⁷ While it is definitely true that there is a temporal delay between Mikovits stating her claims and the audience engaging with it, I argue that this only adds to the possibility of empathizing. As previously noted, the *Plandemic* was released in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic when the public experienced an exacerbated sense of uncertainty that amplified the film’s appeal (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Haelle, 2020). During this time, high-ranking politicians and ‘break-away experts’ attributed the cause of these uncertainties to public health pronouncements, in many cases made by those whom Mikovits cast as villains. Hence, engaging with the film during the early uncertain phase of the pandemic was not a limiting instance of temporal delay but precisely the moment when the villains in Mikovits’ narrative came to be known and disliked by portions

⁷ Osler refers to Edith Stein while raising this possible objection. Osler’s response considers the possibility of empathy over text messages despite there being a temporal delay (Osler, 2021, pp. 22–23). My response to the objection of temporal delay in case of the *Plandemic* is inspired by, but does not take the same approach as, Osler.

of the public. In other words, the limitations of technologically mediated interactions do not restrict the empathic possibilities of the *Plandemic*.

A third and final potential objection could claim that trusting Mikovits during the COVID-19 pandemic is not a case of empathy but of emotional contagion. According to Søren Overgaard (2018), empathy differs from emotional contagion in that the former is other-directed while the latter occurs when one ‘catches’ the other’s emotion without necessarily being directed at said other. An example of emotional contagion is feeling invigorated among others at a protest. Although there is some emotional connection with those around, it is not necessarily directed at the other. The plausibility of this objection rests on the fact that the *Plandemic* was a viral phenomenon at a time of immense public uncertainty. In responding it is important to stress that many learned of the *Plandemic* as it circulated online. Not all who hear of the film will go ahead and watch it. The main focus of this paper and the present argument concerns those who watched *Plandemic* and engaged with the film’s portrayal of Mikovits personally. For this immediate audience, it would not be controversial to argue that they were directed at Mikovits thus satisfying the criteria for empathy as other-directed.

Being a viral phenomenon, however, the *Plandemic* had a less-immediate audience as well. This includes those who may have merely shared the film’s claims; made available by the *Plandemic*’s immediate audience or promoters. They may not have personally engaged with the film’s content and could be argued as representing a case of emotional contagion rather than empathy. However, this need not be the case. Following Francesca De Vecchi, empathy comes in degrees of fulfillment (De Vecchi, 2019, pp. 235–238). The underlying scale of such fulfillment depends on the extent to which the empathizing subject and the empathized subject share a “personal type” (De Vecchi, 2019, p. 237). Following Edith Stein, De Vecchi notes that a personal type is constituted by the “hierarchy of values that structures and orients the person ... and by her historical, social and cultural profile” (De Vecchi, 2019, p. 237). If the empathizing subject and the empathized subject share a personal type, then the likelihood of empathy is increased. Mikovits and the *Plandemic* spoke directly to right-leaning American sensibilities. Moreover, the film was conceived in a way that enables American conservatives to find Mikovits’ framing as a victim plausible and relatable. The film drew upon conservative themes such as white victimhood, distrust of scientific institutions, and an emphasis on personal freedom (Prasad, 2021, pp. 7–8). This is further evidenced by that fact that the film was widely shared by right-leaning politicians and media personalities, conservative groups like Reopen America, and QAnon supporters (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Frenkel et al., 2020). These individuals or groups may not have seen the film but share a ‘personal type’ of similar value structures and overlapping historical, social, and cultural profiles with the *Plandemic*’s portrayal of Mikovits and its immediate audience.

Sharing a ‘personal type’ increases the possibility of mediated empathetic experiences, the possibility of which has already been gestured to in the responses to the potential objections thus far. Mediated empathy among the *Plandemic*’s less immediate audience is actualized by the social character of information in the contemporary social media landscape. What constitutes information is less determined by content and more influenced by the degree to which a detail or event has been shared, circulated, and gained influence within a group (Marres, 2018, p. 427). This possibility is heightened within what C. Thi Nguyen calls ‘echo chambers’ where members share beliefs and can be epistemically isolated from those outside the group (Nguyen, 2020, p. 142).⁸ Consequently, there is a “significant disparity of trust between members and non-members” that is based on a “general agreement with some core set of beliefs” that functions as a “prerequisite for membership” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 146). That supporters of conspiracy theories constitute an example of an echo chamber is seen in Nguyen’s treatment of the notion and responses to the *Plandemic* (DiResta & Garcia-Camargo, 2020; Nazar & Pieters, 2021, p. 13; Nguyen, 2020, p. 148). Although not the same, there is recognizable resonance between the Stein and De Vecchi’s notion of shared personal type and an echo chamber, where the latter can be interpreted as an extreme intersubjective variant of the former. In other words, the *Plandemic*’s less-immediate audience has the potential to empathize with Mikovits based on shared a ‘personal profile’ within an echo chamber-like setting. However, the empathy achieved is of a lesser degree of fulfilment, owing to the film’s promoters or immediate audience mediating this group’s engagement with Mikovits’ claims. Further research is needed to substantiate how empathy in lesser degrees of fulfilment, arrived at in a mediated fashion, operates in the case of conspiracy theories.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper examines how the *Plandemic* and its protagonist Judy Mikovits garnered trust during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The film was released during an extremely uncertain and anxious period characterized by a high degree of political polarization. During this time, research shows that there was a tendency among right-leaning Americans to feel imposed upon by public health institutions and those who wielded its power. In this context, the film orchestrated an alignment of interests between Mikovits and the film’s intended audience. Mikovits was

⁸ The existence of echo chambers is a much-debated issue. Nguyen (2020) follows this debate to argue that questions regarding the existence of echo chambers emerge owing to a conflation of two closely related but distinct phenomena: epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. An epistemic bubble refers to groups where opposing voices have been left out through various forms of accidental omission. But this is distinct from an echo chamber where opposing voices are actively discredited, and their omission is explicitly carried out. The analysis thus far shows that the *Plandemic*’s intended audience constituted an echo chamber in their active discrediting and excluding of official public health narratives and sources.

presented as a victim to the machinations of the same personalities and institutions that American conservatives had come to be suspicious of during this early phase of the pandemic. Thus, the film utilized underlying empathic possibilities that leveraged similar negative experiences of public health institutions to successfully mobilize alternative credibility, hence granting Mikovits the appearance of trustworthiness. By focusing on the *Plandemic*, this paper highlights how anti-institutional sentiments can be mobilized to gain trust in the changing media landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, and periods of crisis and uncertainty in general. Among those unconvinced by the official public health narrative trustworthiness, or its appearance, was not gained by adhering to institutional norms of credibility. Rather, it was achieved by actively framing oneself in anti-institutional terms to mobilize alternative credibility and empathy. However, the film and Mikovits represent only one instance of this phenomenon. Further philosophical, qualitative, and quantitative research along with transdisciplinary perspectives are required to better understand how anti-institutional sentiments can be mobilized to better guard against its negative consequences and efficaciously engage with discontent against public institutions.

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