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# BIOTHRILLER FILMS AND CITIZEN EMPOWERMENT: A VIEWER'S GUIDE TO *OUTBREAK*, *CONTAGION*, AND *FATAL CONTACT*

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According to University of Hannover Professor Ruth Mayer (2007), biothrillers have long been an important pathway into the American “political unconscious,” as the diseases they depict often serve as “metaphors” for some of the nation’s greatest fears—terrorism, social disintegration, immigration. Beyond their metaphorical qualities, biothrillers, which are often based on *real* diseases, also expose Americans to the political, scientific, and social dynamics of public health preparedness and response efforts. Wolfgang Peterson’s 1995 film *Outbreak*, Richard Pierce’s 2006 film *Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America*, and Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 film *Contagion* are all struck from this creative mold, providing largely realistic portrayals of disease transmission, the preparedness cycle, government institutions, and, in some cases, the role of citizen participation in the procurement of public health services. The following viewer’s guide can be used in conjunction with these three films. Questions highlight themes associated with each film while encouraging viewers to compare and contrast *Outbreak*, *Fatal Contact*, and *Contagion*.

## ***Outbreak***

1. One of the most prominent themes in *Outbreak* centers on the militarization of public health. The most obvious examples of this theme were the near bombing of Cedar Creek and the weaponization of the Motaba virus. To what extent does a militaristic approach conflict with the types of social and medical interventions typically associated with public health? To what extent does it conflict with the medical community’s obligation to “do no harm?” Should the military be involved in public health?
2. *Outbreak* attributes the Motaba virus to deforestation in Zaire, which disrupted the delicate balance between humankind and the surrounding ecosystem. Today, the logging industry and industrial food producers are often criticized for contributing to the spread of novel diseases and viruses. Yet, these types of activities do not fall within the traditional purview of public health. Do you believe *Outbreak* clearly communicated the relationship between these types of activities and emerging diseases? How might public health practitioners inform the regulation of these industries?

## ***Fatal Contact***

3. *Fatal Contact* underscores the potential conflict between the national government and state governments, which share many public health powers. Virginia Governor Mike Newsome, whose isolationist strategy defied national government recommendations and may have ultimately resulted in an increased loss of life in his state, is the best example of this phenomenon. Is America’s federal system of government well-equipped to respond to these types of disasters? Which level of government should be responsible for leading the nation on matters of public health?

4. Near the end of *Fatal Contact*, Lauren Connelly, the wife of patient-zero Ed Connelly, emerges as one of the film's heroes, organizing a "neighborhood watch program" that requires friends and neighbors to regularly check on one another and care for the elderly. Lauren's character is distinctive given that much of the film depicts citizens as helpless victims, not active participants in the public health process. Can and should citizens play an active role in public health response efforts? What types of activities should they participate in?

### **Contagion**

5. In a matter of hours, the MEV-1 virus spread from China to England, Angola, and the U.S., sparking a massive global pandemic and killing millions of individuals. The marked interconnection depicted in *Contagion*, a byproduct of the latest era of "globalization," is widely considered a threat to global public health because it allows diseases to disseminate rapidly from one country to the next. Some have gone so far as to advocate for a "one world" approach, wherein public health and many medical responsibilities would be shared across countries.<sup>1</sup> Does globalization necessitate a new approach to public health? What, if anything, can governments do to prevent the spread of disease in this global era? What role should international organizations, like the United Nations and World Health Organization, play in preventing international disease transmission?
6. As evidenced in the Alan Krumwiede storyline, the conspiracy theorist who trumpeted the effectiveness of the homeopathic remedy "forsythia" in his popular blog, the internet has increased citizens' access to medical information, be it through medical websites, government pages, personal blogs, or even corporate sponsored advertising. How do you acquire medical information? How do you judge the accuracy of this information? Did *Contagion* make you more skeptical about the kind of medical information available on the internet?

### **Compare and Contrast Questions**

7. Compare and contrast the diseases depicted in each of the films. Which of the three viruses is the most realistic? Which of them is the least realistic? What, if anything, did these films teach you about disease transmission?
8. Each of the films casts government in a different light. Whereas *Outbreak* presented a very aggressive national government, *Contagion* and *Fatal Contact* generally portrayed a fair and competent national government, although state governments were depicted as incompetent and overwhelmed at times. Which of the three films provided the most accurate depiction of government? Why? Did any of the films change your understanding of government's public health functions?

### **References**

Mayer, R. (2007). Virus Discourse: The Rhetoric of Threat and Terrorism in the Biothriller. *Cultural Critique*. 66, 1-20.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Scientists embrace the "One World" approach." (2011). *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 89, 853-928.