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Laurier professor critiques pop culture responses to pandemic diseases

WATERLOO – When the 2011 film *Contagion* was released, it was billed as an “ultra-realistic” opportunity to build public awareness about pandemics like SARS and bird flu. But as Laurier researcher Penelope Ironstone points out – in a paper she will deliver at Congress 2012 – the film isn’t always helpful as an educational tool.

“The quote on the posters was ‘Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t touch anyone,’ and that was the message many people took away from the film,” says Ironstone, who is an expert on health-crisis communications. “As an example of social marketing – using the principals of advertising and popular culture to market social goals – it’s unsuccessful on several levels.”

One such failure is the film’s heavy reliance on Hollywood-style storytelling devices – a product of the need to sell tickets and assuage investors in a tough commercial climate, Ironstone says. In the film, the virus spreads to North America after an unfaithful woman, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, cheats on her husband while en route to a business trip in Asia. Her “original sin” infects an entire continent, while her loving husband, who carefully safeguards his daughter’s virtue against an insistent boyfriend, is spared.

“That type of Hollywood-friendly moral message muddies the film’s educational intent,” Ironstone says.

Ironstone, who keeps cuddly, stuffed viruses in her office – a pink, sad-eyed blob is swine flu, a white tube with Holstein-like blotches is mad cow – has spent much of her career studying the ways in which we think and talk about epidemics. She has looked into cultural responses to the Spanish flu of 1918, which killed between 50 and 100 million people, as well as H1N1 and the early HIV/AIDS epidemic.

“There’s no shortage of material,” she says. “Pop culture has paid an enormous amount of attention to these diseases, and with the advent of services like YouTube there’s even more to sift through.”

Ironstone’s research is designed in part to figure out how popular culture is misleading people about disease – for example by whipping people into a frenzy of fear, which can lead people to question simple, everyday solutions like regular hand-washing. She hopes that research like hers will help emergency authorities to tell accurate stories and to better counter misinformation the next time a major pandemic hits.

“One of the things I’ve learned is that there is an enormous amount of complexity and uniqueness to each of these outbreaks, although the public is not generally comfortable with hearing that,” she says. “They expect the authorities to have all of the answers, instantly. We need to find a better way to convey uncertainty.”

Ironstone will present her talk, “Entertainment Education? Social Marketing, Pandemic Governmentality and *Contagion* (2011)”, on May 30 at 10:45 a.m. in the University of Waterloo’s J.G. Hagey Hall of the Humanities, Room 1106.

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