

Engaging with the Great Pandemic War: Citizens, Artists, Academics

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Abstract Facing the Australian experience of the global Great Pandemic of the virus SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome CoV-2), known as the resultant disease, Covid-19, many citizens, including artists, writers and academics, engaged through analytical and creative works. Many of us have become 'citizen scientists', different from "Facebook Certified Experts", denialists and anti-vaxxers who declare that they have "done my research" ... often on YouTube or Google sites. Seeing "Our Pandemic Zeitgeist", a warlike experience, through the lens of my own engagements as a prose poet diarising our stories, a painter escaping the pandemic, one of several researchers advocating better health policies, and a trench warrior against Facebook pandemic fantasists, this account offers a distinctive perspective.

Keywords: Covid-19; pandemic arts; health policy; social media; polemic; Australia

"What did you do in the Great Pandemic?" is a question about usefulness and social responsibility. Have I as an artist and researcher made a contribution to society, to the war against the great disease, although I am not a medico nor a life sciences researcher? Significantly, did citizen academics and artists make a useful contribution to our responses to SARS Covid-19, from public health safety policy to mobilising popular compliance? That might include polemical interventions for social good. I also engaged in a different polemic, in the dirty trenches of social media, I happily bombed doubters with facts and citations. Might such endeavours prevent others from adopting their strange denialist positions? I hope so.

Neither a clinician nor medical researcher, I can appreciate the Twitter reflections of Covid-19 medico, scientist and public communicator, Houston Professor, Peter Hotez:

...Many of my colleagues in the health professions made different but equally meaningful contributions. Their story each time was the same. "Now is the time to help humanity, this is what we trained for, let's roll".

Given the social and political tribalism which shaped Covid-19 policies and public attitudes and behaviour, perhaps a social policy researcher can make a useful contribution. Discharging the obligations of the citizen and the social responsibilities of the university during a national crisis, we should use our knowledge for good.

In a contrary, sceptical view, "Are academics useful?" Or is the reality implicit in the negative assumption of that early television quiz show *"It's Academic"*? That is impractical, not useful, just mere academic or "book" knowledge. Such assumptions have roots in the scepticism engendered by contemporary populism. They also have historical provenance given the colonial-imperial experiences of Australia. A lack of awareness of indigenous culture, the practical demands of Bush frontier pioneering, and the inutility of derivative northern hemisphere book knowledge made "what works" a higher priority than concepts and ideas. Today even more serious rejections of expert knowledge have a social media and even political and policy influence. Scientific and demographic evidence does not matter to Denialists, who prefer nonsensical anti-state and anti-science/anti-expert conspiracy theories to researched evidence.

Artists and poets offer a special mirror to our times. As journalists write "history's first draft", war artists and writers explore the experience of living through a different campaign, our pandemic era, in artistic variations on ethnography. Both contribute to public understanding and also to the "war effort" in the campaign against the enemy disease. War artists' and writers' multiple journeys can also have a therapeutic benefit, for the creator and for the work's audience. Such artistic journeys are important, even in Australia, until recently the "lucky country" during the pandemic. At first, Australia was more protected from the virus by circumstances and policy: at the end of the world and off major transport routes during the global pandemic; only behind New Zealand in successful protection. Closed federal and state borders, 95% double vaccinated and state public health measures meant a lower death toll initially despite the conservative federal government's vaccination rollout failures. By 20 June 2021 Australia had only 910 deaths.ⁱ However, given popular pandemic fatigue and business and political expediency, the war took a turn for the worse, as protective measures, reducing transmission, were lifted. The Omicron wave, and its variants, raised that number to 8,556 by 2 June 2022 and then to over 17,000 deaths by late December 2022.ⁱⁱ

Massive public support for vaccinations and majority acceptance of lockdowns initially reduced infection numbers and death tolls, even as the "Pandemic Zero" goal was soon supplanted by "flattening the curve". Things went wrong when the conservative Liberal National Party (LNP) government, looking towards the May 2022 election (which it would lose), weaponised the Doherty Institute's five phase projection, with the last phase—normality. (Doherty 2021) After Delta, came the Omicron summer waves from January 2022, just as an epidemic of "opening up" was happening. Despite the life-saving closed borders of WA, SA, Tasmania and Queensland, and the Victorian government's five lockdowns, (totalling 263 days), suddenly, we were "over it", but the pandemic was not over us.

The pandemic's unequal burden killed the elderly, the unvaccinated and impacted the working class and their children, and frontline health, service and factory/warehouse/retail workers who could not work from home, unlike most middle class professionals. Along with struggling small businesses, with limited government assistance, and social media crazies, they formed a potential pool of dissidents, many putting everyday life and business before public health.

Minority dissent is part of the pandemic war story. Despite strong public respect for health authorities and expert epidemiologists, and among the highest double vaccination rates in the world, three minor expressions of dissent appeared. One, in a global world, Denialists were reinforced by rampant and uncontrolled social media including overseas doubters. Trump's scepticism added to the American death toll, reaching one million in 2022, while Brazil had 666,676 deaths by June 2022 after President Jair Bolsonaro joked about this "little flu" or "media trick".ⁱⁱⁱ Second, the loud and extremist minority opposition reflected contemporary populism more generally. Trump-like Denialists spread "fake news" on social media, from doubters and quibblers to anti-vaxxers, anti-mandaters and full-blown conspiracy theorists, linking Big Pharma, Bill Gates, 5g, the World Economic Forum and sometimes Pizzagate "paedophiles" and suggested eugenic aims. Small violent street protests emerged, against the lockdowns and against vaccines and masks. Stropy "Karens" made videoed maskless shop gestures, including fantasies tendentiously linked, in ersatz legal language, to "sovcits", "sovereign citizens", the constitution, natural law, the Charter of Human Rights and the Nuremberg trials. A third form of dissent was significant. A mix of unemployed workers (retail and manual workers, unable to work from home), small business owners, official spokespersons for industries (big business, retail and hospitality, entertainment and the arts) and state and federal Liberal Party (LNP) principals beat the economic drum. "Work Through it", "Push On" they declared. Some endorsed a pro-infection "herd immunity" view—inevitably "Everyone will get it".

In 2022, internationally, popular, media and politicians' acceptance of "opening up" became predominant. Conservative politicians and business leaders suggested that the Covid-19 experience was now just "endemic", an epidemic, not a pandemic. Their attitude of denying the continuing danger was understood by the much earlier reflections of the American novelist, Upton Sinclair: "It is impossible to get a man to understand something if his livelihood depends on him not understanding" (Sinclair, 1935). Even Labor political leaders, after Federal and Victorian state election victories, accepted a "transition" approach, a focus on individual not social responsibility, not even replacing mandated protections against transmission with leadership and encouragement. Significantly, in the Victorian elections, the minority outsider parties, 'Angry Victorians', 'Sack Dan Andrews Restore Democracy', 'Freedom Party', won only microscopic support. Further, the sceptical Liberal Party opposition was comprehensively defeated.

In 2022, several official medical experts began to treat the virus as another "respiratory illness", despite its bloodborne impact on the hearts, brains and other organs of Long Covid sufferers, consequent heart events and chronic fatigue. After 11 million infections from a 26 million population, even 5-10% becoming Long Covid patients matters—for them and for the overburdened health systems.

What did I do? Artistic roles in responding to the Great Pandemic?

I want to reflect on five responses, some polemical—analysis, poetry, and art, complemented by lobbying to influence pandemic policy, and trench war fighting Facebook denialists. This is an unusual academic article. Explicitly—not just implicitly—it tells a personal story, even as it considers the artistic and political implications of the work. In the arts and humanities, story

differs from academia's new fashions, inappropriate and borrowed science models of ritualised dances and choreographies, from reviews of the literature to methodology. Our war against disease involves the personal story's social, political, and existential aspects. The war artist and "war correspondent", even behind the front lines, are personally, not just intellectually and artistically engaged. Like the brutality of modern warfare—from Dresden to Mariupol—the Pandemic wreaks havoc daily on "civilian" populations, on everyone's daily lives and psyches. Are there two alternate readings? Is the artist the canary in the mine, capturing the *Zeitgeist*? Or are artistic responses merely a projection from the individual's psyche? Me? Both perhaps. In a public health crisis, the academic researcher, like the war correspondent, wears their citizen hat, seeking better human outcomes, not just knowledge; thus the opinion articles analysing policy and behaviour, my moral support for the epidemiologists engaged in the policy fray, and lobbying a political contact.

While my pandemic story was not of victims dying in hospital, nor endangered and stressed frontline healthcare workers, the pandemic hung like a cloud over all of us. It was one which called artists and writers as in the lockdown collection, *2020*. (Watkins et al eds. 2020) I also picked up the prose poet's pen and the painter's brush to express my artistic responses to "*Our Pandemic Zeitgeist*" (Alomes 2020). In early days, of empty toilet paper shelves, the poems addressed the lighter aspects of "the world on hold" and the paradox that screen addicts remaining home reduced viral spread. Invoking a lazy cartoon character, Norm, I enthused "you're our hero, Norm ... Just keep lying back and enjoying it, / You've done it for Australia". By May-June 2020 poems pursued life in a pandemic. "To zoom or not to zoom" with its key questions - "What to wear? ... Set design... a painting? a pot plant".

The poems constituted a diary of everyday life and the psyche. "A Hard Lockdown" in Melbourne, the city with nearly the longest lockdowns. Several were unsettling: "A Time for Rotting ... There is a season, a time/ A time for rotting/ For decay". Others went from "grey skies blackening" in July 2020 to pleasing moments of hope as case numbers dropped in the southern spring:

Spring rhythms growing
(spring hope)

Everyday pleasures in small places
eating, gardening, washing
Musical rediscoveries
even Zooming fun
Emerging sun, blue sky moments, fluffy clouds
Walking pleasures
Wattle to magnolia
as roses and blossoms return
Spring is in the air

Others echoed the child's plea-cum-question which we shared - "Are we there yet?" "Spectres Around Us... Our Pandemic *Zeitgeist*" was more confronting:

We do fear it
The spectre of death
Even if it's not through direct knowledge

I know people who have lost,
lost close ones to the virus,
The spectre of fear is about
And not the only one
For those addicted to global melancholy
Weltschmerz is everywhere
A wounded world with gloomy prognoses
Trump threatens everything
Climate change clouds are gathering
Dictators everywhere
Jobs disappearing, travel gone
Psyches ravaged by more than boredom,
We are all infected by the pandemic Zeitgeist,
The spectres are all around us.

Poetry, like narrative, is not an antonym of analysis. One poem expressed a polemical and political engagement with a failure by a government committee, the Infection Control Expert Group, to address aerosol transmission and masks. Influenced by my experience of Japan, masks seemed clearly valuable, as they are now when I wear my N95 mask in public indoor spaces. Except this committee with hospital infection experts, focused on surface transmission, seeing infection through a bacteriologists' microscope. Without any public health epidemiologists among its members (or aerosol transmission experts), it embodied Kuhnian cultural/scientific lag. (Kuhn and Hacking, 2012) I pursued it in this poem and in an email to a Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) researcher, who appreciated the reflection on Western ignorance of North East Asia, and its early success in SARS Covid-19 infection case reduction. The poem, also appreciated by the state Australian Medical Association president and several epidemiologists, captured the committee's ideology and unalloyed self-confidence:

We keep Australia safe
But you need to remember
Our Principal Rule
Rule Number One
Don't mention the "M" word
(whispers) "masks"
Rule Number Two – please see
Rule Number One

Exceptions occurred—the 'M' word could be used when “preceded by the adjective “dangerous” or “accompanied by a disparaging sneer ... medically proven to increase potency”.

After Professor Lidia Morawska led a June 2020 submission (Morawska, Milton et al, 2020) of over 240 public health and air experts to the WHO on aerosol transmission, it finally found full recognition much later in 2022. Calls for a paradigm shift, stressing that clean air like clean water prevents the spread of disease (Morawska et al, 2021). Medical science moves slowly. In the scientific luminary Max Planck's more pessimistic view, after Kuhn, on paradigmatic change—it only comes after the old generation has died off:

A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it. . . . An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents: it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out, and that the growing generation is familiarized with the ideas from the beginning: another instance of the fact that the future lies with the youth. (1950, pp. 33, 97)

Poetry at War

The “poet militant”, after the English romantic poets, emerged. The “poetic epidemiologist” went beyond capturing pandemic living’s angst as poetry became political. It challenged the drift from public health safety policy to an almost "let her rip" political/ economic policy, initially led by the conservative (LNP) government of New South Wales in late 2021. In poems, as in opinion articles, I declared poetic war against the enemies of health safety, adumbrating the fundamental argument that "A healthy society is the precondition of a healthy economy", not the business lobby’s inversion. In several poems I pursued these outriders, not knowing that their views would become the 2022 norm in politics and business, media and public opinion, even after Omicron’s tsunami of infections. Poems also posted on LinkedIn and sent to epidemiologists declared war on the superspreader state of New South Wales and its Premier Dominic Perrotet as in ‘State of Domicron’:

From south west Sydney to Eastern Suburbs
From Sydney to Newcastle, Dubbo, Northern Rivers and beyond,
It’s been everywhere
Generously donated to the ACT, NT and NZ,
don’t forget Queensland and Victoria, SA too,
from the only state in which the Hazzard^{iv} rules
and the singer cannot sing,
the state of the silent doctor,
or just unheard CHO,
Kerry Chant, mute,
in a “hazzardous” state,
The State of Domicron

Later poems redefined the selfish idea of personal choice. “Looking after ourselves” returned in a healthier version. Drawing on Hamlet’s soliloquy, it reflected the gap between the “N95ers”, believers in N95 masks and protections, and the anti-vaxxers proliferating like stage four cancers on social media:

That is the Question
To mask or not to mask.
That is the continuing Covid-19 question,
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous looks,
Or to take arms against the seas of infection
And by vaxxing and N95 masking end them.

To breathe, to walk, to distance,
To avoid the sneaking peril of Long Covid
After a “mild” infection,
Vaccinated plus, working to enjoy health,
In lungs, heart, brain and more,
Avoiding the legions of Fakebook Fantasists,
Denialists and Anti-Vaxxers,
unmasking their muddy dreams of "natural immunity",
selfish business “leaders” cheering,
now compliant media and politicians saluting,
... the myopic many who only "know" one thing -
"It is about me, ONLY ME"...

Pandemic Painting

After a long vacuum I had returned to art in the new millennium. Polemical art through expressionist portraits, caricaturing Right populist leaders, in democracies and illiberal states, including economy first pandemic doubters, Boris Johnson, Bolsonaro and Trump and “push through” ideologue prime minister Scott Morrison, entitled “The Hollow Man”.^v Logically, my pandemic art might follow in a similar direction—intensified caricatures and expressionist moods. However, other directions called. Only two works tackled the Coronavirus directly. One built around the apparent shape of this spiked virus was a study in fear—partly a collage, multiples of a stressed figure’s head.

During the pandemic my art took two different directions. In poetry, I was engaged in diarising everyday life and psyches and in polemic. In art I chose escape. Despite an expressionist love of colour and intensity, I had never painted abstracts before. Similarly, I rarely painted landscapes or close-ups of nature, flowers and plants. Now, I dove right in. Bright explorations into colour. Slightly soft, subtle colour. Luminous yellows and pinks, which can’t be appreciated in black and white. If gender stereotype clichés suggested that earlier populist political caricature poems were “male”, were these softer escapes from our threatening world “female”? Bright acrylic colours, some with a soft “pastel” feel took me away from our everyday horrors and pandemic corroded psyches if not bodies.^{vi}

The other departure is a romantic escape into nature. Never a botanical artist, I was now inspired by my daily walks in lockdown, finding nature in front gardens, in a park and by the creek. Earlier painting suburban roses, I pursued the calming power of gum leaves - from the Tasmanian blue gum, with which I grew up, to gumnuts and flowering gums.



Image 1. Fear of the Coronavirus

A second depicted “chin nappies”, with a suggestion of the surreal. In darker tones, three rather strange, spooky figures wear chin nappies, not masks covering nose and mouth.



Image 2. Chin Nappies

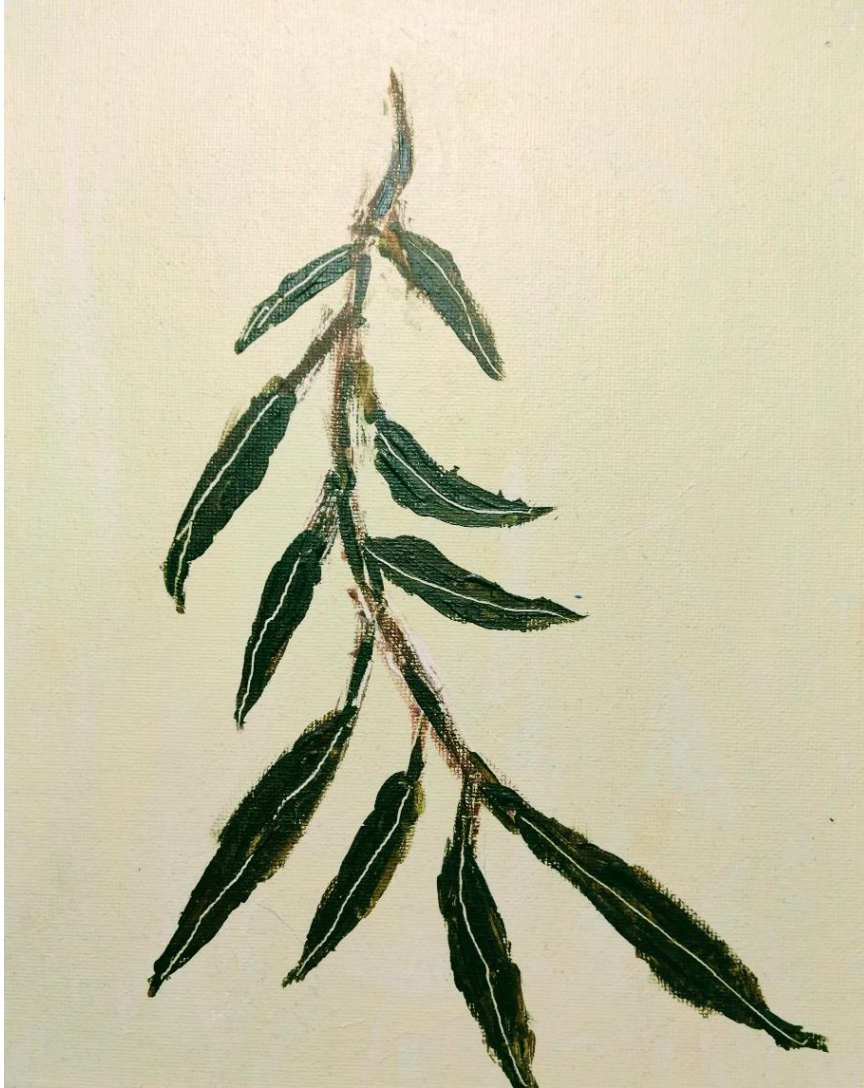


Figure 3. Pandemic Escapes - Gum Leaves, Eucalyptus Dreaming

Opinion, Influence and Power: A Public Intellectual in Pandemic Times

In the millennial era of declining public culture and rising social media, can the public expert and the public intellectual have influence for good? Even aside from quasi-Trumpist Facebook scepticism about science and scientific experts as ‘elites’, is influence possible in an era of multiple orchestras of media outlets, legacy, web and social media? Influence on public attitudes and safe behaviour or on government health policy? Does influence wax and wane as your connections come and go? My articles were on a niche opinion site, *Pearls and Irritations* online journal, while the *Age* site inevitably preferred epidemiologists to a social researcher’s analyses, even though my drafts were read by epidemiologists. Then, in 2022, the media decided the public “had had” the subject, and few articles or even reports appeared. With a Victorian state election coming in November 2022, and the populist anti-vaxxer and anti-mandate jibes about the Premier Dan Andrews as “Dictator Dan” the government would not act—nor would governments across Australia, Europe and the US. This pandemic fatigue leading to government indifference and failure to act to reduce the death toll was an international tendency, as well as a contrast with the Australian protective measures of 2020.

As populist rhetoric could inflame extremism (the Great Replacement theory which motivated the Australian mass killer who attacked a Christchurch mosque in 2019). Now, anti-vaxxers made scary threats against political leaders. One Angry Victorians candidate invoked a sniper metaphor of pink 'mist' (after a bullet in the brain) about the Victorian Premier.

I sought influence in three ways: one, opinion articles on pandemic policy and public participation in the campaign; two, communications with leading researchers with a larger public involvement; and communications via email with a Victorian government cabinet minister, whom I know as a local member, and with the Chief Health Officer, whom I do not know. Did the latter read my emails? I don't know. The minister did read them but I fear they only had a small impact on policy, even as I joined the epidemiologists and the AMA in 2022 arguing for a voluntary people's campaign for further vaccinations, improved ventilation and N95 mask wearing.

I had pursued important arguments in the opinion analyses (Alomes, 2021/2022): the problem of the official "expert" denialists of the Infection Expert Control Group who failed to recognise aerosol transmission; the weaponizing of the Doherty report, suggesting an easy movement towards phase five, or normal; the inappropriate use of the term "fully vaccinated" to refer to double vaccination, when protection against severe illness from Omicron required three doses; the vaccine campaign's implicit and erroneous suggestion that vaccine alone provided protection, not, as OzSage called it, "Vaccine Plus" with N95 masks and social distancing and other health safety measures; and the argument for the best Australian Christmas in 2021 and then reiterated in 2022, an *al fresco* or 'outdoorsy' event, reducing viral spread. Yet, I was a small gun in the battle even as the community epidemiologists, the bigger guns, were not always heard.

Pandemic Polemic: Social Media Trench Wars

Wars are not just won on the battlefield. Popular morale and competent generals and ministers are fundamental. Social media has been crucial, even if irresponsible. How many people have been killed by Covid-19 due to social media's proponents of disinformation, their bots and their everyday followers? Social media has been a vehicle for transmitted panic with a deadly effect—from Trump and Bolsonaro's denialism and incompetence, and to a lesser degree BoJo, Boris Johnson, and the Australian federal government. Fundamental is Facebook's responsibility given the rabbit hole character of social media. How many people did Facebook indirectly kill by allowing virus and vax disinformation to rage, among its top 20 topics? As Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen told Congress and the UK parliament in 2021 algorithms can't filter disinformation, especially as they are programmed to inflate conflict. (CNN, 2021) Human beings as moderators cost money, which billion dollar businesses won't spend. Profit before people is the reality—other algorithm moderation costs lives, not just in the micro-climes of bullying of adolescents and children which Haugen recognised. Ideally, using a carriage service to spread false information "endangering public health" should become a crime, with million dollar and jail penalties, for the social media host (Facebook), even more than individual group sites. Clinical psychologist Professor Ali Jazayeri observed the dangers of social media's "very deep impact on our lives. The world that we see on Facebook and other social media sites is not a true and real world." (Thomas, 2016)

Wars are won after strategies devised by generals, not just by individual infantry fighting in the trenches. Most institutional health professionals eschewed these trenches, either from professional concerns or the view that the endeavour was pointless. However, in contrast, I chose to take on individual denialists on Facebook, perhaps wasting my time but clarifying my thoughts on this quasi-populist phenomenon. I entered the trench wars, hand to hand combat, especially the unmoderated Hobart *Mercury* newspaper site, from which health disinformation is rarely removed.

Health disinformation is common on Australian Facebook sites and in Comments attacks on the WHO site. Similar ignorance happened on TV and social media regarding sports stars having heart problems due to vaccination, despite numerous Fact Check refutations. (Fact Check.org, 2021) A rational argument suggests changing views of social media posters only comes from listening, politeness and respect for views, even those not worthy of respect. I took another approach. If the denialists, the anti-vaxxers, and those who pursued denialism through quibbling over details (neither vaccines nor masks providing 100% protection) could be challenged, aggressively, with evidence, a good result might eventuate. As in the micro personal interaction argument, it would not change their views. However, two positive results might come: one, they might give up and stop posting; two, other readers may not buy their unsubstantiated anecdotal assertions.

Ed Coper demonstrates in *Facts * and other lies: Welcome to the Disinformation Age* (Coper 2022) that deliberate active disinformation, not just erroneous information (or misinformation), has proliferated exponentially in our last decade of social media. It has been compounded by the anti-science, anti-expert and anti-government ravages of Far Right and mainstream Right populism. (Bellolio, 2022) When community safety demands public health leadership and popular consent, neo-liberal extreme individualism poisons that possibility as in the pandemic's toxic death toll. After academic research on populism and emotive tabloidisation of popular discourse (Alomes & Jones 2009; Alomes 2022), and reading the literature on social media characteristics, I understand the larger patterns. (Cover, et al 2022; Wardle & Hossein 2017; Marwick and Lewis 2015) However, engaging with local denialists and even conspiracy theorists in the trenches of the unmoderated Hobart *Mercury* Facebook site was a place for hand-to-hand combat, using pandemic evidence and logical arguments rather than addressing larger sociocultural studies and concepts.

I deployed an unrelenting logic which I did not know I had, being, by temperament, an intuitionist in the spirit of the humanities. The sword of argument may not change the denialists. Given the pandemic death toll, there is a case for shafting them. Consider examples. The easiest reply to the declaration "I have done my research" was to present them with the meme image, Facebook Certified Medical Expert, or ask where they had done their PhD or their MBBS. Simple assertions such as "I have a right to my opinion" and "We need to see both sides of the argument" and "I make my own decisions" were easy to shoot down. The reply: "This is nonsense. We have a community problem." I usually ignored those who trusted, with 'common sense', the body's natural immune system or believed that Jesus was an antibody, although one poem asked why a so-called "God" allowed the pandemic.

Denialists' views were rooted in Australian ignorance of the pandemic's international disease patterns. Critics of "Dictator Dan" (Andrews, Victoria's Premier) only compared the Victorian long lockdowns to other Australian states, rather than international infection and death statistics. Tasmanian complacency after opening up encouraged the "mild flu" suggestion, as

earlier border protection ensured good health. Denialists asserted that the vaccine was hurried and untested and that the vaccinated could spread the virus with an implicit theme of “Why bother?” I replied: “This statement is false. The vaccinated can spread but at a much lower rate. Vaccinations can also often prevent 1. Serious symptoms 2. Hospitalisation 3. ICU and needing a ventilator. 4. Long Covid 5. Death. Perhaps you are personally happy with those five results.”

The larger context is our era of neo-liberal Darwinian survival of the fittest individualism, complemented by consumerist narcissism. Often the resultant values are falsely couched in arguments about individual rights and free speech in a democracy. However, violent maskless street protests during a pandemic endanger public health. To one freedom advocate I replied: Non-sense. “Each to their own” does not apply when a Pandemic threatens the herd. There is no “I” in herd, in team, in people or in health.” Anecdotal assertions proliferated: “... this is my observation based on my experience. It is factual so it is not an opinion.” I responded: “This is non-sense. Individual experience may result in individual facts and views based on them. That is opinions. Larger patterns constitute scientific facts, unlike individual stories.” Has the individualist cult of authenticity gone too far, imbuing some people with fantasies of their own thoughts' veracity and revelatory nature?

Denialists Avoid Facts and Statistics

Social media posters offer throwaway line assertions, then demand evidence from others. They offer no facts and never mention death tolls or international patterns. Numbers are rare—they never consult Johns Hopkins University's country data. They never provide: overseas deaths and possible pro rata Australia death tolls; nor details of the over 12 billion vaccine doses worldwide (Bloomberg, 6 June 2022) when they claim the vaccines are untested, unhealthy, and dangerous—a demographic, partial, proof of safety; nor details of the over six million dead worldwide. They also ignore the World Health Organisation calculation of around 14.9 million deaths or *The Economist's* calculations of up to 20 million, including excess deaths. Absent too is Australia's official AstraZeneca vaccinogenic death toll—eleven. (World Health Organisation 2022; *Nature* 2022)

Their statistical vacuum's rare exceptions include the comorbidity fallacy—the imaginary percentages of ca. 97% of deaths *with* comorbidities – the idea of deaths *with*, not *from* Covid-19, when the fact is the opposite, a 10:90 ratio. Citations are absent as are links from *Nature*, *The Lancet*, *BMJ*, *JAMA*, *NEJM*, *AMJ* or links to the CDC or the Therapeutic Goods Administration, TGA, or comparative case rates from world tables. Links to denialists' YouTube videos, especially from the US and Canada, are common.

Denialists and Anti-Vaxxers

My impressionistic assessment, based on posters' "About" information on Facebook, discerns several predominant characteristics of male denialists. They include: young; limited education; self-employed; tradies; from rural or small towns and rural Queensland; petrolheads (cars, bikes); with big dogs; sports interested; unfriendly use of “mate” in posts; Mediterranean origins or descent ... particularly Greek; often a "don't tell me what to do" attitude regarding

mask and vax mandates. Females vary more, but share some characteristics—limited education; rural; sometimes small business, often in natural therapies fields with essential oils, and an interest in romantic fantasy; and also Mediterranean. In a secular country, a minute few are religious.

Do these Facebook virtual protestors comprise half of the vaccine hesitant, in a 95% vaccinated country? Are the other 2.5% intractable radical extremists with extreme Right connections? Or just “lost” individuals, either tempted by Denialist fantasies or small business owners with an understandable—if myopic and selfish—desire to resume their business or their work?

Official and Expert Denialism

When I wrote the original draft article earlier, I thought that there might be little to add in future, unless Covid-19 variants proliferated even more. Not so, it seems in 2022-23. Worsening pandemic fatigue has maintained social media denialism and added new fantasies of "transitioning" to a post-pandemic era, enthusiastically embraced by politicians, business and media. Reduced testing and reporting (official and media) have encouraged ignorance of continuing Covid-19 deaths, Long Covid illness and unmasked "new normal" behaviour.

Significantly, government health officers have been silenced or actually bought the official folly central in the colourfully presented but bland December 2022 National Cabinet document, Strategic Framework for Transitioning Covid-19 Measures. (National Cabinet, 2022) It referred to 'managing a respiratory illness', as if the disease is just another flu - deadly echoes of Bolsonaro and even loose words from Albo, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Except it said nothing about the forgotten excess deaths figures calculated by the Australian Institute of Actuaries (Esterman, 2022) nor about the multiple impacts of Long Covid—vascular, neurological plus/with adverse health events for the heart, lungs, brain, and other organs and increased risk of cardiac events, chronic fatigue, diabetes and of acceleration of dementia. Covid-19 infects through respiratory transmission but after infection it works as a systemic disease. (Mayo Clinic, 2022)

It seemed that by late 2022, business first, work first, fun first—aka 'freedom' from worrying about the pandemic had become the norm. Except pandemic infection numbers and deaths grew, reaching not a peak, the predecessor to a fall, but a continuing plateau. The waves had not gone. At the same time Australian official institutions lost the plot. Even after the CDC recommended that vulnerable adults (older, with comorbidities) who had not had a booster for greater than two months should receive a bivalent against the Omicron variants, and the bivalent for children, Australia's technical immunisation approval body, ATAGI, did not follow. It did not recommend a third booster, the bivalent, for the vulnerable, pretending that the virus was endemic, seasonal, risk only going up in winter. (CDC, 2022) Somehow "expert denialism" was still the reality in Canberra as official folly matched wider popular folly. New Year ersatz optimism confirmed the attitudinal trend. While the weekly national death toll dropped from over 200 to 114 on the last Friday of 2022, limited testing and self-reporting and ignorance of the US XB.55 outbreak did not augur well. As Victoria 's Chief Health Officer warned, Covid-19 is still with us, even as hundreds of thousands thronged city streets, welcoming in the New Year as if they did not have a care in the world.

Conclusion

Citizen, artist, war correspondent—influence? Did I have a little influence through the small personal audiences for paintings and poetry on Instagram and LinkedIn, and through my contacts, and the small, if elite, readership of the *Pearls and Irritations* opinion forum? Similarly, on the small Facebook communities? Just a writer's, artist's or academic's illusion? Along with four vaccine doses, N95 masks and social distancing care, and luck, my approach has got me through the pandemic without infection ... at least so far. As we gain historical memory before the next pandemic perhaps I have contributed as well as also advising and supporting epidemiologists and infected friends. I had hoped more of my epidemiologist contacts would put aside the individual roles which follow from professionalism and sing as a chorus with orchestrated media releases and follow up. I had proposed to two effective medical/scientific leaders in the advocacy of policies to reduce transmission and infection that they approach two Nobel Prize winners to personally put a case to the Prime Minister for the government leading a voluntary campaign. It did not happen. No luck again. My support role was less important than several socially responsible epidemiologists and researchers who became continuing public advocates, supporting measures to reduce transmission of the virus, including professors Brendan Crabb, Nancy Baxter, Mike Toole, Raina Macintyre, Marylouise McLaws and Adrian Esterman. I had a smaller role, in a similar vein even as government and public indifference became the norm. Fundamentally, if on a much smaller scale, may I invoke Mikhail Gorbachev regarding his more significant and bigger endeavour, remaking Russia and the world? Sadly, he reflected "I tried". During the Great Pandemic War, "We tried."

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- ^{vi} www.instagram.com/stephenalomes