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An Open Letter to the Tribeca Film Festival about *Vaxxed*



by [Penny Lane](#) in [Festivals & Events](#) on Mar 24, 2016

[Andrew Wakefield](#), [Documentary](#), [Penny Lane](#), [Tribeca Film Festival 2016](#), [Vaxxed](#)

**T**ribeca Film Festival, I love you but you made a very serious mistake.

On Monday, the widely discredited and dangerous anti-vaccination quack Andrew Wakefield tweeted: “Haven’t posted forever. Huge news tomorrow.”

Perhaps he hadn’t “posted forever” because the media finally stopped giving him a megaphone. Perhaps [once people in America and England began dying of measles](#), journalists finally realized that the “two sides to every story” approach granted Wakefield was literally killing people.

Last I heard, Wakefield was headlining [Conspira-Sea](#), a seven-day cruise where passengers learn about crop circles, chemtrails, yogic flying, ESP and astrology. Good, I thought, that’s where he belongs.

Well, not so fast. It seems the quack is back. Wakefield’s “huge news” is that he is now a documentary film director, and that his new film *Vaxxed: From Cover-up to Catastrophe* will premiere [at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival this April](#).

Your film festival guide suggests that if I’m interested in *Vaxxed*, I might also be interested in the category of “documentaries.” Well, as a documentary filmmaker who spent eight years making [a film about a quack](#): yes, Tribeca Film Festival, I am very interested in both your choice to screen *Vaxxed* and in the field of documentary film.

I have always admired Tribeca’s ambitious and broad documentary programming. I first saw *(T)ERROR* there, and *The Genius of Marian*, and *Tomorrow We Disappear*, and *Thank You For Playing*, and *Give Up Tomorrow*, and *Let The Fire Burn* – and so many other excellent films. And this is what makes your decision all the more pernicious: audiences have come to expect excellence from your documentary programming.

When *The Los Angeles Times* contacted you for comment, [they received this response](#): “Tribeca, as most film festivals, is about dialogue and discussion. Over the years we have presented many films from opposing sides of an issue. We are a forum, not a judge.”

Here is the problem with your statement: it assumes that *Vaxxed* is just like any other film taking on an unpopular, controversial or provocative subject. It is not. There is a big difference between advocacy and fraud, between point of view and deception. For you to claim there is no difference helps to perpetuate Wakefield’s fraud.

Also, it is disingenuous for you to claim you are not a “judge.” You are literally judging when you choose a film, from thousands of submissions, to screen under your banner.

A lot of people, including those who buy tickets to see docs at your festival, believe documentary film has become a new and important form of news. But journalists are expected to tell the truth — or at least not knowingly spread dangerous lies. Your choice to include *Vaxxed* in your documentary lineup — a lineup including films about abortion, Syrian refugees, solitary confinement, the American electoral system, in-vitro fertilization and drone warfare — suggests that you think documentary filmmakers can’t be held even to the latter standard. This threatens the credibility of not just the other filmmakers in your doc slate, but the field in general.

So yes, I take this personally.

While it is true that we documentary filmmakers constantly debate vexing questions about the perceived and real differences between our work and the work of traditional journalism, I assure you that we are not debating whether it is okay to knowingly spread dangerous lies.

Consider how many lies there are in [the first 30 seconds of the Vaxxed trailer](#). Wakefield’s cinematic disregard of the truth means his film should not be called a documentary any more than *Loose Change* is.

In other words: [issues around truth and ethics in documentary can get thorny](#). But this one is easy. This film is not some sort of disinterested investigation into the “vaccines cause autism” hoax; *this film is directed by the person who perpetuated the hoax*.

And this hoax isn’t cute, or fun, or thought-provoking. Very possibly, some people will walk away from your festival having been convinced, in part because of your good name and the excellence and integrity of your documentary programming, not to vaccinate their children. And very possibly people will die as a result.

There’s no shame in having been taken in by quack – the reason I made *NUTS!* is that I wanted to explore just how easy it is to fall for a quack, especially one cloaked in the authority of a documentary film.

I believe you were fooled in just this way: taken in by an apparently legitimate “documentary” film, a film which unethically used the tools of my trade toward bad ends. I believe you made a very serious (if human) mistake. But it’s not too late to fix it. You can still apologize for your error and cancel the screening.

I know that some people will say I’m advocating censorship when I say this. I appreciate that concern. The last thing I would want is for festivals to stop being bold, independent tastemakers afraid of controversy. And I would never suggest banning the film is some global sense (as if that were even possible!).

But the problem is not that *Vaxxed* is controversial, or even that it’s deceptive. Honestly, I consider a large number of well-made, popular documentary films fairly deceptive. The problem is that it is dangerous misinformation being legitimized under the banner of your considerable prestige.

*Penny Lane* (Our Nixon) is a two-time grantee of the Tribeca Film Institute whose most recent film, *NUTS! (concerning an infamous, evil quack who was still considerably funnier and nicer than Andrew Wakefield)* recently won a special jury award for editing at Sundance and opens at Film Forum on June 22.

**3/31/16, CORRECTION:** An earlier version of this post included an incorrect link to support Ms. Lane’s statement that “people in the America and England began dying of measles.” The link has been updated to reflect her source for this information.

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