

## READERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF AIDS STORIES IN THE PRESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH PROMOTION AND SOCIAL POLICY\*

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### ABSTRACT

Reactions of college students to stories about AIDS appearing in the British press were analyzed in this exploratory study. Readers' responses appeared to be based on a negotiation process between the intent of the message sender (the reporter), message content (the text), readers' purpose, and the larger social context (newspaper policy, role of the media and norms of the society). The readers seem to operate within structural and institutional constraints and exhibit selective attention and interpretative biases. Communication of information about HIV infection via the press viewed as ongoing social activity filtered through, and integrated into, the receivers' daily experiences and frames of reference needs to be investigated further.

### INTRODUCTION

AIDS is very frightening and will continue to be so until a cure or vaccine is found. It not only results in premature death, but in the forfeiture of one's valued social goals. It also affects the fabric of society - adding an additional element of distancing between minority subcultures hit hardest by HIV and mainstream society.

In the post AIDS world, people try to protect themselves psychologically at the same time that they are trying to realistically appraise their own vulnerability. They do not always do an adequate job (Douglas 1985; Fischhoff et al 1984; Tversky, Kahneman 1974). They tend to underestimate low probability risks in their everyday lives, and worry instead about dramatic events reported in the media that also have low probability (Douglas 1985). Public opinion surveys conducted in the 1980s found that the media both defined reality and helped shape risk estimates among the uninformed and justified and reinforced existing views among those who already had formed their own set of biases or had been exposed to media messages over a long period of time (Nelkin 1991).

Thus, understanding how viewers and readers react to and process information is pertinent in the design of public health initiatives in the fight against AIDS as the media is the main source of the public's information on medical, scientific and technological problems in the public arena (Lemert 1981; Nelkin 1987; Short 1984; Troyer, Markle 1983; Witt 1983) and is likely to be believed (Robinson, Kohut 1988).

This paper is an *exploratory* investigation of how readers' interpretations of newspaper articles about AIDS influence their beliefs about:

1. their own vulnerability to contracting HIV,
2. the way people infected by HIV should be treated,
3. the social policies toward the AIDS epidemic that should be enacted.

While public health research has investigated the media's influence on the public's knowledge, attitude and behavioral changes on various public health issues (Jones et al 1980; Lemert 1981; Nelkin 1987), it has not focused on the direct link between the presentation of individual news stories and readers' reactions and how they are intertwined.

News is a human construct, a cultural product and the product of a set of institutional meanings. The news journalists act as gatekeepers between different publics. Reporters and editors choose what will constitute "news" for each edition of the newspaper. This selection process is based on intangible criteria and rests upon inferred knowledge about their readers, the society and professional ideology.

...news stories are coded and classified, referred to as their relevant contexts, assigned to different (and differently graded) spaces in the media, and ranked in terms of presentation, status and meaning. (Hall 1981 148).

In order for an audience to accurately decode a message, writers need to draw upon their reservoir of cultural and social learning, encode it in an appropriate format so that the connection between readers' experiences and writers' intended can be executed (Hall 1980). If the readers are not aware of the relevant referent system, then they cannot decode the message (Leiss et al 1986).

For journalists, the society is bureaucratically structured so that they carry around in their heads a map of relevant sources for any type of event that would be newsworthy (Fishman 1980), e.g. The Centers for Disease Control in the U.S.; The Health Education Authority in the U.K. In order to understand what is happening and what is important, reporters rely on the same procedures

followed by the relevant bureaucrats as their own schemes of interpretation while writing a story.

...as a practical consideration in doing investigative work reporters will not consider that different versions of events indicate different realities. (Fishman 1980 117)

Instead the media adopts a mode of selection "which diffuses the reality of alternative conceptions of the social order" (Cohen, Young 1981 32). Most often the structures used to select and analyze events reflect the maintenance of the existing power arrangements.

Thus, when interpreting the possible influence of a newspaper story, at least four interacting variables should be investigated:

- 1) The larger social context - specific newspaper policy, characteristics of mainstream newspaper coverage and the social arena in which both the readers and newspapers operate.
- 2) The intentions of the writer, e.g. to educate, entertain, persuade or shock.
- 3) The text of the article, e.g. words used, images elicited, metaphors presented.
- 4) The readers - their positions in the social structure and their purpose in reading the article.

Readers often choose a "preferred reading" or risk messages by taking out of context words crucial to the intended meaning or by selectively remembering those stories whose overt messages are congruent with their own beliefs. Each reading consists of a decoding - a process of negotiation between the intent of the writer - the content of the text and the psychological and social significance attached to the act of reading (Liebes 1989; Peck 1989). Some readers may search for information on which they can base a decision, others read in order to formulate an opinion, reinforce existing feelings or seek reassurances. Multiple images in the text allow room for a multitude of reactions, some of which may even be diametrically opposite to those the writer wants to create. Thus, readers may be predisposed to accept certain messages, to hone in on key words consonant with their desires and belief systems and to change their opinions within

these parameters.

The negotiation process between reader and text in order to ascertain meaning is likely to be neither idiosyncratic nor random. Instead, readers operate within certain structural and institutional constraints based on their social experiences and place in the social hierarchy. These constraints lead to a filtering of messages, determining those that are systematically selected and framed and those that are under emphasized or rejected (Liebes 1989).

The social context of the society is likely to pervade all aspects of the reader-interpretation process; coloring the sender's perceptions, the text of the message and the repertoire of frames available from which the reader can choose and remain within the normative domain. For example, the risk of AIDS is superimposed on a complex world where high-risk technology and its inherent risks are endemic (Perrow 1984). Moreover, an underlying distrust of the scientific community, corporations and governmental regulatory agencies permeates discourse (Dietz et al 1989). The complexities and variations in the reader-text nexus need to be kept in mind when evaluating the impact of the press on health related beliefs and attitudes.

Furthermore, the media itself both reflects and creates a health/social policy issue that has an evolving culture expressed as metaphors, catch phrases, visual images and moral appeals (Gamson, Modigliani 1989). The media can influence public opinion in two ways. First, by setting an agenda, it influences the public in determining the issues that should be of concern. Second, it affects how the public thinks about these issues by presenting and embellishing dominant clusters of elements indicative of specific viewpoints (Liebes 1989).

For example, British society and the British Press are blatantly more homophobic than American society (Pearce 1981; Watney 1988) and the British tabloids pay scant attention to their weak code of journalistic ethics (Meldrum 1990). In the UK, British Press coverage of AIDS "blocks out any approach to the subject which does not conform in advance to the values and language of a profoundly homophobic culture...." (Watney 1988 52). Their reporting of the HIV epidemic seems to fit Stanley Cohen's (1972) concept of "moral panics." Cohen suggests that periodically a condition becomes defined as a threat to social values and its nature is presented in a

**Table 1: Types of Articles About AIDS in Three British Daily Newspapers For Sixteen Weeks in 1988**

	The Sun	The Daily Mail	The Independent	Total
Human Interest	21	14	11	46
Informational-Editorial	5	19	25	49
Business	1	5	7	13

**Table 2: Types of Articles About AIDS in Three British Sunday Newspapers For Sixteen Weeks in 1988**

	News of the World	The Mail on Sunday	The Observer	Total
Human Interest	17	1	5	23
Informational-Editorial	3	7	9	19
Business	0	0	2	2

stereotypic manner which can produce changes in legal and social policy.

But Great Britain does not have a monopoly on homophobia. Members of the extreme right in the United States voiced their anti-gay attitudes freely.

It is a short step from seeing AIDS as an inevitable result of deviance to claiming that sufferers from AIDS have brought it upon themselves, and, by another short step, that AIDS is a just punishment for the sin of deviance. (MacKinnon 1992 165)

Jerry Falwell called AIDS God's punishment for homosexuals (MacKinnon 1992 165) and Pat Buchanan published a vitriolic piece about the "Gay Plague", referring to the epidemic as a wrath of God (Kinsella 1989 263). This is not surprising as during the 1980s, the UK and the USA were in the throes of Thatcher and Reagan's brand of conservative morality (MacKinnon 1992).

Newspapers, furthermore, develop personal styles and a type of readership. They focus on breaking news and dramatic events (Hilgarten, Bosk 1988; Krinsky, Plough 1988). When an epidemic of the proportion of AIDS occurs, the drama of the story is often a prime ingredient. The focus on breaking news discourages detailed coverage of long-term issues (Gans 1979; Sandman 1986; Sandman et al 1987).

### AN EXPLORATORY INQUIRY

This exploratory inquiry looks at written reactions of college students to AIDS stories in order to understand how the four variables - social context, writers' intentions, specific text, and reader characteristics and goals - interact in decoding and interpreting messages as part of the reader's negotiation process. It is exploratory in nature and at this stage attempts to clarify issues for further investigation, rather

than be generalizable.

### METHODS

All AIDS stories appearing in three daily British national newspapers and three British Sunday papers were collected for two periods totalling 16 weeks in 1988. The first period started with the onset of the Health Education Authority's AIDS media campaign on February 17, 1988; the second commenced with the International AIDS conference held in Stockholm on June 12, 1988.

The selection of newspapers was based on the advice of the Health Education Authority. *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, *The News of the World*, *The Mail on Sunday*, and *The Observer* were suggested as representing both the spectrum of political opinion and style of AIDS coverage, e.g. tabloid, straight news or human interest stories. These newspapers had counterparts in the United States that reflected similar political perspectives and coverage.

AIDS articles for the weeks having the greatest press coverage of AIDS stories in the above newspapers were divided into three packets consisting of 13-15 articles each. All students in three sociology classes in an American college (61 females and 40 males) were given one of these packets to read and were asked to write their reactions to each story in their packet.

Three types of stories appeared in both the U.S. and the U.K. papers, but the degree and consistency of stereotyping, exaggeration, misinformation and homophobia were greater in the U.K.

### Human Interest Stories

The focus is on the life or lives of individuals. Often these are the stories with the scare headline and support the grossest stereotypes. A *New York Post* headline "AIDS

MONSTER" is typical of this genre.

### Information Stories

These mainly present "facts" to the readers about government funding, number of AIDS cases, scientists' predictions about when an AIDS vaccine might be developed. Some of the "facts" were misleading, such as using AIDS and HIV infected interchangeably which was common practice. Loaded words and slanted coverage were also used in these articles. For example, a *Daily Mail* article claims that the Health Education Authority targeted heterosexuals for health promotion campaigns rather than homosexuals, who were the ones at risk. Emotive words such as alarming, victim, plague, epidemic, scary, menace, fault, innocent were liberally used by reporters in the human interest articles and, to a lesser extent, in the news stories.

### Business Articles

These deal with such topics as the development of new AIDS related drugs coming on the market, the cost of insurance policies for young, single males and increases in the sales of condoms. These stories emphasized the financial aspect of the epidemic for businesses, were usually written in a straightforward style and were primarily located in the business section.

After reading each article, students were asked to write which words, phrases, information or arguments influenced their opinions on: 1) being friends with someone who was HIV positive, 2) working with someone who was HIV positive, 3) having an AIDS Hospice or home for babies with AIDS located in their neighborhood, 4) government funding for support services for AIDS patients, 5) government funding of AIDS research, 6) mandatory AIDS tests for job applicants, and 7) mandatory AIDS tests for insurance applicants. These questions dealt with attitudes toward personal social distance, commitment to social responsibility toward others in the society and protection of the individual's right to privacy. The respondents were also requested to explain why the articles did not influence them and to summarize their reactions after reading the entire packet.

Two main reasons governed the decision to use British newspaper articles, written for the British public, as the material presented to American students for their reactions. One was the attempt to limit bias. Students in New

Jersey were likely to be familiar with *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The New York Post* and New Jersey papers such as *The Newark Star Ledger*, and *The Trenton Times*, which would be American equivalents of the British newspapers used in this study. If material from these newspapers were used, it would be difficult to separate the students' reactions to the text, headlines and placement of articles from their expectations associated with those newspapers. Thus, asking American students about their reactions to articles in unfamiliar British papers should reduce their preconceived notions of what messages to expect.

Second was to see how underlying prejudice toward gays and minority groups (that otherwise might not be expressed) could influence the reader's decoding process. Fears generated by "yellow" journalism run rampant can release latent prejudice (Smithurst 1990). Some progress toward acceptance of divergent life-styles and cultures was being slowly made in parts of the United States, despite the opposition of the Moral Majority. What was unclear was the extent and depth of this acceptance. There is reason to believe that substantial prejudice still exists as findings from a Roper survey

suggest that the role of attitudes toward homosexuals should be at the center of future explorations of the relationship between the media coverage of AIDS and public opinion. (Stipp, Kerr 1989 98)

While using articles from the UK addresses methodological issues pertaining to the text being viewed, the use of a captive student population involves other possible kinds of biases. The frame students use in decoding articles may differ when they are reading for a required assignment rather than of their own volition. Also, students may fake reactions just to have something to say. To offset the possibility of faking, students were told beforehand not to expect that all articles would influence them and to indicate when they did not think that they were influenced by a specific story. Many availed themselves of this option.

### FINDINGS

While the writer's intentions, textual material, reader's purpose and social context are always part of the reader's decoding and interpretative process in the negotiation of

meaning derived from the print media, these factors are not always of equal significance. One, or more, can dominate the negotiation process, even when the stories cover one major topic. This can be seen from the readers' responses.

### The Text: Facts or Fancy?

The text of the articles appeared to influence many of the students. Pieces of information that were ambiguously worded or taken out of context frequently led to substantial misunderstanding. For example, an article in *The Observer* provocatively titled "Danger of the AIDS Virus Super Carriers" (March 6, 1988) also illustrated the impact of the text on the reader. The story reported on a scientist's explanation of the *variability of transmission rates*. Both the title and the information led many readers to focus on one aspect, not necessarily the point the author was trying to make.

This is scary because only after one sexual contact a person contracted AIDS. What would happen if one night at a party I got drunk and had sex with the girl who had AIDS and I got infected....The reason I am uncertain about being friends with someone is let's say she is a girl and one night something happens.

Again others focused on casual contact even though the article was discussing sexual contact.

I was influenced by the use of documentation in this article....This article strengthened my fear of casual contact which made me reconsider being friends with AIDS victims.

The quote "Quite simply, there are people who just happen to be extraordinarily infectious" influenced my opinion. Some jobs may give more opportunities than others to pick up the virus and with these extremely infectious people in the environment - I don't think it's safe.

### Writer's Intentions: The Many Facets of Persuasion

Along with the text, perceptions of the writer's intentions also played a dominant role in respondents' interpretations. Both the reporter's perspective and the newspaper's political stance affected extent and coloring of coverage. The British Medical Authority and the medical community were often used as the

scapegoats for supposedly mishandling the AIDS crisis. For example, one brief article (*The Sun*, Friday, March 11, 1988) stated that some general practitioners did not mention AIDS on the death certificate "to spare relatives extra grief" and that this under reporting had led to an underestimation of the number of AIDS related deaths. This seemingly "objective" piece of information, however, was reported under the headline "AIDS COVER-UP CLAIM." The first paragraph further reinforced a "cover-up scenario" rather than a "sensitivity to clients feelings" perspective.

AIDS is killing more people than thought because of a cover-up by doctors, it was claimed yesterday. (John Kay, *The Sun*, March 11, 1988 13)

Several students accepted the "cover-up" scenario at face value and even extended the interpretation. The second quote refers to an AIDS cover-up protecting patients rather than their families after the death of a loved one, while the third quote describes a *mass cover-up*.

I was surprised to read that doctors would be involved in a "cover-up" concerning AIDS deaths.

...the fact that doctors are covering-up for AIDS patients bothers me. If the doctors aren't being honest, then how can tests, census, and research be accurate?

This article can illustrate the mass cover-up that is occurring in the name of human condolence, and humanity, dignity and respect.

Judging from prior comments about the "AIDS Supercarrier" and "Cover-Up" stories, some students accepted information presented in a biased fashion or associated with an authority figure as being accurate. An example of this was *The Mail on Sunday's* exclusive feature on the Masters and Johnson book *Crisis: Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS* where the more far-fetched inferences about becoming infected through casual contact were presented in bold-faced headlines as being the latest and most accurate scientific truths from these great experts. In the United States, *Newsweek* magazine also put this misinformed and misguided book on its cover. A typical reaction of the minority who believed Masters and Johnson was:

The only article that made me sway toward not wanting to have a friend with AIDS was the one concerning the Masters and Johnson study that you can get AIDS from kissing because many of my friends are of the opposite sex and a kiss can be out of friendship.

A few others, however, seemed quite sophisticated and sensitive to choices of words and nuances in the articles they read. *The Daily Mail* attacked the book and its authors for their unscientific findings and unprofessional conduct. The student reaction to this article supported the criticism.

This book *Crisis: Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS* is very misinforming. Many will buy the book because it deals with questions that most people want to know about. But by publishing misinformation, and half truths, the authors are running the risks of having mass hysteria break out...

Furthermore, some were aware of the influence exerted by newspapers' political stances and journalists' personal perspectives. They delved behind the text and searched for the "behind the scenes" explanation of the writer's agenda.

To me, writers seemed uneasy about the disease AIDS. They did not know what to write or they seemed to beat around the bush, so to speak. For example, many of the authors of the articles used such words as, "probably," "implications" and "believed." These words mean a lot when you are writing an article on AIDS. Writers are telling me that the AIDS victims which they are writing about may or may not have contracted the virus from the unknown source.

### Newspaper Styles

The text and perception of reporters' intentions appeared to have influenced the readers' decoding and interpretation process. When the material was written as a straight news or human interest story, it was taken seriously. Many students, however, claimed to be "turned off" by scandalous headlines and strident language. They found the AIDS coverage of the rich and famous churned out by the tabloids to be ludicrous and tasteless. Neither did scare words like "alarming", "fear", and "menace" seem to trigger reactions. Instead of

the deliberately loaded words having a strong effect, the students indicated that it was facts, information, and scientific evidence that either reassured or frightened them.

After reviewing the assigned articles, it was clear that the type of reporting was the most important element. This determined if I formed new opinions, changed my previous opinions, or strengthened my already existing ones....The articles that were more intelligently written, well-documented and unbiased were most effective. I found this type of reporting to influence me much more.

One respondent even became very skeptical of any scientific data written in the tabloids because of their "yellow journalism" image.

The article ("Prize for AIDS Ref" *The Sun*, June 29, 1988) did not change my opinion at all. Even if it contained detailed medical statistics and had quotes from medical professionals, I could not believe it. I find it very difficult to believe anything written next to articles entitled "Selfish Bitch" and "I'm too Scared to Kiss." I doubt the truthfulness of the story.

### Social Norms at Work: The Guilty and the Innocent

The norms of society appeared to affect readers' interpretations of stories dealing with "AIDS victims." The press supported an invisible borderline between "us" and "them" (Watney 1988; Wellington 1988) - the ones who are the innocent victims of AIDS, receivers of blood transfusions, babies, hemophiliacs, and the ones who deserve AIDS, the homosexuals, the intravenous drug users and prostitutes. A minority of the student readers reflected this conservative public. They were judgmental and differentiated between "innocent victims" who deserved help and understanding and "those who deserved what they got."

I only feel compassion towards AIDS victims when they contract the virus in a way that is not their fault. For example, a sickly patient needs a blood transfusion; the new blood is infected with the AIDS virus....

....I feel no compassion towards dope dealers that get infected, or a pregnant woman who does not exercise proper prenatal care by taking drugs. My heart breaks for the baby born to an

AIDS victim because there is no hope in the world for that child.

Human interest articles about "nice" people who had AIDS and even those about stigmatized members of society who were treated inhumanely strengthened feelings of compassion. A collection of human interest vignettes called "AIDS - Living With the Killer" (*News of the World*, March 27, 1988) evoked mainly sympathetic, but at times ambivalent, feelings reflecting the mixed messages in the readers' social worlds.

The most reassuring point in this article is that AIDS can't be spread as easily as the public seems to think. This fact strengthens my attitude toward working with HIV positive persons and befriending them to a degree. Through victims' comments, I realize they need to feel accepted by their families (obviously) and their peers. I certainly would try to make them feel accepted. If it weren't for my prejudice against homosexuals, I may have even felt bad for them.

### **Social Norms at Work: Not In My Back Yard**

Reaction to stories about hospices and homes for children with HIV infection also reflected ambiguities in society. Students seemed to factor conflicting emotions and values into the interpretation process. Fear of catching AIDS and fear of undesirable people (parents, families and friends of drug addicts who would visit an AIDS home for children or an AIDS hospice) were the reasons given by those opposed to having these facilities located in their communities. The information in the texts regarding these points as well as humane social attitudes toward the ill and dying, particularly toward children, also were salient. Furthermore, some students explicitly expressed awareness of their double standard - fearing a hospice for others but wanting one for themselves if they ever were unfortunate enough to develop AIDS.

I feel that homes for AIDS babies and AIDS hospice would be beneficial to the victims because they would be surrounded by people who understand what they are going through. They could provide support for each other. I am not quite sure where these homes could be located because of the uneasiness of the general public. I must say honestly that I am not sure whether or not I would feel comfortable with this kind of home in my neighborhood but then again

if I had the virus I think I would want a place like this to turn to.

### **Text-Reader Interaction. Mandatory Testing as a Panacea**

Self-interest, altruism and misinformation were threads students wove into the decoding process pertaining to articles about mandatory HIV testing for insurance and jobs. Students' attitudes toward mandatory testing were mixed, but in general their support increased after reading the articles. Approval of mandatory testing permeated HIV coverage by the British press. The reports, regardless of the accuracy of this position, "framed" mandatory testing as a way to retard the spread of HIV infection. This was congruent with the readers' desires to avoid contracting the infection. The coverage played on fear and panic while at the same time the text stressed the elimination or containment of AIDS, a universally accepted social value.

1st surgeon to get AIDS from surgery - proves everyone must be careful.... The fact that there is no case is a bit reassuring, but the fact that he was never tested may make mandatory testing seem logical.

Doctor 'First to Get AIDS in Operation'" The title was enough influence for me. It's really frightening to think you can catch AIDS in surgery. It makes me not want to work with an AIDS patient being that I'm going into the field of Nursing.

### **DISCUSSION**

The essential problem with the mass media's coverage of AIDS is due to the historical accident that in the United States AIDS struck gay men first, even though worldwide, most transmission of HIV is through heterosexual contact. Thus, in the early years of the epidemic, no coverage or "Gay Plague" coverage was the norm in the United States and Britain. The media amplified and gave expression to anti-homosexual feelings and other kind of prejudice, reflecting strong taboos in American society, and even stronger ones in British society, about sex and drug taking (Meldrun 1990; Smithurst 1990).

In the first half of the eighties, the Reagan administration ignored the emerging HIV health crisis, refusing to listen to the government scientists who requested additional funding for research and treatment. The press also paralleled this reticence by deciding that

information about the spread of HIV did not deserve much coverage. When reporters did write an AIDS story, their writing strategies reflected their own membership in communities, particularly the pattern of identifying with schemes of interpretation supported by relevant bureaucracies. While interpretive strategies of readers also reflect membership in communities, these communities may, or may not, be the same as those of the reporters. Thus, readers belonging to various subgroups might use different "frames" to interpret the AIDS articles; decoding signifiers dissimilarly and focusing on disparate key words. This was shown by the reactions to the "AIDS surgeon" and Masters and Johnson stories discussed previously.

From their comments, some students in this sample appeared to adhere to the "logic of fear" - when fear dominates reason - (Eskola et al 1988), others seemed to belong in the "worried well" category (DiClementi et al 1986) and still others maintained what Mary Douglas (1985) refers to as a "strong but unjustified sense of immunity."

Respondents' attitudes regarding their own vulnerability to contracting AIDS, toward the treatment of individuals suffering from AIDS and their opinions about social policies toward the AIDS epidemic varied substantially and these mind sets interacted with the text to produce preferred readings. These perspectives need to be studied further with more rigorously designed studies. What are the characteristics of the people holding each "mind set?" What percentage of the public falls into each category? Are these categories more likely to be mutually exclusive or overlapping? What kind of health promotion would likely be most effective for members of each category?

A few additional findings also need to be investigated more fully. The public is apparently "of two minds" with regard to its fear of AIDS. Despite an increase in the percentage of people reporting that they knew someone who had AIDS, public opinion polls did not find a trend of increasing concern about AIDS as a problem for one's own health but some indication of an increasing concern about spread of AIDS beyond present at-risk groups to the general population (Rogers et al 1993). These diverse attitudes were expressed both in the newspaper articles and by the respondents depending on the reader's primary frame of interpretation.

Newspapers also placed their stories in a social context often expressed by the newspaper's style. For example, the tabloids - *The Sun* and *The News of the World* - are expert at simultaneously promoting closeness and distance between their readers and the central characters in their AIDS articles. By describing the hero, heroine, or victim as having similar daily life problems and fears as the general public, reporters are able to generate reader identification with them. At the same time, readers can distance themselves because their own life styles or social class positions are so far removed from those depicted in the press, e.g. a pornographic film star, a doctor who practiced in Zimbabwe, or a divorced, gay member of the peerage. One can speculate that readers' interpretation of this type of press coverage might help explain why some heterosexual couples appear to have only changed their sexual behavior slightly (Becker, Joseph 1988; Campbell, Waters 1987; Department of Health and Social Security, Welsh Office 1987) and why college students express little concern about getting AIDS from their present partners. After all, how many readers have slept with 1000 women or played around with Soho "toyboys"!

Furthermore, these speculations are compatible with attribution theory which acknowledges that if society is already hostile to the presumed agents of harm, the blame will be stronger (Douglas 1985; Hastings et al 1987). Data from a Roper Poll is consistent with the hypothesis that people who are prejudiced against homosexuals are more resistant to the media's messages about risk factors and how the disease is transmitted (Stipps, Kerr 1989). These prejudices against homosexuals and drug addicts showed up clearly in students' reactions to the human interest stories.

The emphasis on monogamous relationships in the press and in health promotion campaigns seems to have led some readers to place loved ones and strangers into entirely distance risk categories based on social distance rather than risk behavior criteria.

The article also pointed out again how AIDS can be spread through normal sexual intercourse. But this has no effect on me because I know who I am going with.

This is consistent with research findings indicating that people tend to cope with

dangers in everyday life by underestimating low probability risks in familiar situations (Douglas 1985; Fischhoff et al 1984; Tversky, Kahneman 1974).

While the press obviously influences its readers, it is difficult to conclude whether the media primarily clarifies or mystifies the public about significant public health policy issues. The evidence is mixed with regard to AIDS, as the accuracy of the coverage improved over time (Rogers et al 1993). A conclusion drawn in 1994 would not necessarily have been made in the mid-1980s.

In the early days of the HIV epidemic, the newspapers in both the United Kingdom and the United States framed their stories in several ways that needed to be overcome later. First, they often did not report HIV stories at all. Ignoring a story frames an event as much as reporting it as it then becomes transformed into a "nonevent." Then reporters emphasized AIDS as a gay disease. When it was evident that HIV could be contracted heterosexually, the emphasis was on intravenous drug users and prostitutes. Then the emphasis was on fear stories dealing with catching AIDS through casual contact. AIDS messages have been polarized, emphasizing everyone's vulnerability on the one hand, while on the other hand pointing the finger at "high risk groups," i.e. gays, drug users, Africans, Haitians who are in some sense considered immoral (Nelkin 1991).

Though many newspapers carried health education articles throughout the years, it is not clear how well these messages stood up when the constant barrage of scare stories repeatedly undermined the impact of the more reliable articles (Wellington 1988). Even after the expansion of AIDS coverage in the United States in 1986, when reporting became more comprehensive and accurate, there have been significant gaps in the reporting (Nelkin 1991). What is new is not necessarily newsworthy and incomplete information can have a serious negative impact on public social and health policy.

But, on the other hand, international evidence indicates that a hopeful pattern in AIDS coverage is emerging. Reporting on AIDS seems to have developed in three phases and these phases substantially differ in their provision of accurate and needed AIDS messages for the public. The first phase was based on fear, ignorance and prejudice, a second phase emphasized responsible reporting and the third emerging phase stresses scientific and policy

developments (Netter 1992).

Despite all the problems with inaccurate and stereotyped media coverage in the early days, the press has played a major role in informing, if not educating, people of the risk of HIV infection. Moreover, the media has set the agenda and influenced the way in which survey opinion polls addressed the issue of AIDS. The journalists then reported on the poll findings, further expanding their impact (Dearing 1989). Thus, journalists, directly and indirectly, played a significant role in framing social policy and health promotion messages regarding AIDS.

In conclusion, this exploratory study lends support to the position that delivery of direct and indirect AIDS health behavior messages via the press can be viewed as an aspect of ongoing social activity negotiated through the interaction of the writer, text, reader and social world and filtered through and integrated into the receivers' daily experiences and frames of reference. Furthermore, experience indicates that when the lenses of the encoder and decoder are not "tuned in" to a perceived health problem, particularly one that is not part of their experience, or one that invokes latent social prejudices and taboos, the press cannot be counted on as a viable tool of the public health community. In fact, the media may have already failed in sufficiently alerting their audiences to the next epidemic - tuberculosis.

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