
Coverage of HIV/AIDS in the US media has declined since the late 1980s, and this has coincided with a decline in research into media representations of HIV/AIDS (Bardhan, 2001; Swain, 2005). Nonetheless, this section will review the available studies of US media coverage since 1981, calling attention to some of the major themes and transitions in the reporting.¹ This will establish the parameters within which the photojournalism of HIV/AIDS, as a particular component of media coverage, should be considered.

The best overview of US media coverage can be found in the 2004 study published by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Brodie, Hamel, Brady, Kates, and Altman, 2004). Entitled AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic 1981-2002, the KFF study analyzed 9,000 news stories from four national US newspapers, three major regional papers, and the three major television network news programs. For ease of discussion, certain years were grouped together according to stages and key events in the epidemic. The groupings used throughout the KFF report (Brodie et. al., 2004: 2) are: 1981–1986, the early years of the epidemic and the Reagan years; 1987–1990, increased attention to epidemic, the advent of AZT and the first Bush presidency; 1991–1995, Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe declaring their status and the Clinton presidency; 1996–1999, the introduction of protease

Figure 1: Total number of HIV/AIDS news stories in selected media outlets with key events and cumulative U.S. AIDS cases over time (Brodie et. al., 2004: 3).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the decline in coverage begins in 1987, only six years after the original identification of what came to be known as AIDS and well before the large increase in the cumulative number of cases. The fact that coverage is not directly linked to specific characteristics of the disease is underscored by another major study (Armstrong, Carpenter and Hojnacki, 2006) which reviewed the media coverage of seven diseases (including AIDS) across nineteen years of US print and broadcast coverage and concluded that mortality was not a consistent predictor of media attention to disease (see Figure 2).
According to Armstrong, Carpenter and Hojnacki (2006: 735, 760) AIDS attracted vast media coverage at the outset because it originally had a high case-fatality rate, it struck white males in the prime of life, was connected to sex and benefited from the publicity work of organized advocacy groups. Indeed, who suffers is a critical factor in explaining different levels of attention, and race is an issue in determining who warrants attention. Armstrong, Carpenter and Hojnacki (2006: 731) found that diseases that burden blacks rather than whites received less attention – a result that is robust across their full range of diseases and associated media coverage. Similarly, the KFF study revealed that once African-Americans were increasingly infected with HIV (such that they now account for half the new infections in the US, with AIDS the leading cause of death amongst African-
Americans aged 25-44) coverage was directed elsewhere, with only 2% of reports on this aspect of the disease (see Cohen, 1999: ch. 5 for the trend of under-reporting of African-American communities in stories of AIDS). Overall, once HIV/AIDS is understood as a chronic but manageable disease, rather than a guaranteed death, coverage declines (Swain, 2005: 259-60).

While overall coverage declines in the twenty-one years of the KFF study, the nature of the coverage changes. As Figure 3 demonstrates, throughout the two decades reviewed coverage was overwhelmingly US-focused with 94% of print stories having a US dateline and 86% representing a US-only perspective. Starting in 1997 this focus begins to shift, with the number of international stories increasing and domestic stories declining. One of the drivers of this is reporting was the issue of AIDS in Africa, which peaked at 14% of all stories in 2000. By 2002 some 20% of stories had a non-US dateline and more than 40% presented some form of global perspective. In the same period broadcast news was more likely to present a global perspective than the newspapers, with 62% of their stories having some global perspective, compared to the 40% of newspapers (Brodie, et. al., 2004: 2, 4).
The KFF study provided a comparative analysis of US and European news coverage on the global pandemic by including over 600 stories from *The Times* (London). Although the majority of reports in *The Times*, like their American counterparts, had a national bias, overall 36% of *The Times* coverage presented a non-U.K. perspective, compared with 14% of total U.S. print coverage (and 19% of coverage by nationally focused U.S. papers) that presented a non-U.S. perspective. Similarly, 14% of the London paper’s coverage had a non-U.K. dateline, compared with 6% of total U.S. print coverage (and 7% of coverage by nationally focused U.S. papers) that had a non-U.S. dateline. During 2000-2002, *The Times* coverage was closer to US levels, with 48% of their stories having a non-U.K. perspective, compared
with 40% of total U.S. print coverage (and 49% of coverage in nationally focused U.S. papers) that presented a non-U.S. perspective. From this the KFF report concluded that the UK paper “was more likely than U.S. print coverage to present a global perspective” (Brodie et. al., 2004: 5).

In terms of identities singled out for coverage there have been significant changes. Gay men were the subject of all the stories (100%) in 1981, but declined to just 5% of reports in 1986, a proportion that was static at that level until 2002. The affected population identified in the news has also changed, shifting from the US – declining from 18% to 10% between 1981 and 2002 – to Africa, which rose from 1% to 19% in the same period. However, in terms of the visual “face of AIDS” on television news, the most frequently portrayed population was health care professionals, who were the focus of 20% of broadcast stories (Brodie et. al., 2004: 5).

(a) Questions for photographic practice

While, overall, US and European media coverage of HIV/AIDS has declined in the first two decades of the pandemic, there have been some significant shifts in the nature of the coverage. Although the majority of coverage in the US and UK media outlets reviewed above remains focused on the domestic or the national, there has been a marked increase in international and globally-focused coverage in the period 2000-02, with the story of ‘AIDS in Africa’ being the main driver of this shift.
This suggests that the increased internationalization of media coverage is correlated with the advent of the securitization of HIV/AIDS. Whether there is a causal relationship between the two is uncertain. In the one available study to date on the media coverage of HIV/AIDS as a security issue, which deals with the situation up until 2000, Johnson (2002) reveals how the issue was not well covered in the US press prior to a front page *Washington Post* article on 30 April 2000 (Gellman, 2000). This means that it was not until some four months after the release of the US National Intelligence Estimate on global health and disease, and some four months after then Vice President Gore’s address to the UN Security Council, that the first story summarizing the shift in policy discourses on HIV/AIDS appeared. This suggests that the much-discussed ‘CNN effect’ – whereby it is assumed that policy makers often follow media controversies – was not operative here. Indeed, the fact that nineteen other global papers ran accounts based on the *Washington Post* story showed how the dissemination of the national security frame was an instance of “inter-media agenda setting” (Johnson, 2002: 88). Furthermore, although there was significant political attention on the securitization of HIV/AIDS in the wake of the *Washington Post* story, there have been relatively few articles about the disease written from within the national security frame (Johnson uncovered only seventy two in the period 1981-2000). Nonetheless, despite this paucity of reporting, public opinion polls have shown widespread acceptance of the national security frame as
applicable to HIV/AIDS, underscoring the power of this mode of representation in organizing popular understanding (Johnson, 2002: 91).

None of the media analyses reviewed here – with the exception of the KFF study’s discussion of the face of AIDS on television network news – have been concerned with the photographic images that accompany the reporting under review. Johnson (2002: 92) noted that these pictures merited qualitative research, hence the concerns of this report. There is however one significant question which arises from this section’s review for photographic practice. Most of the media coverage of HIV/AIDS has not be indexical – that is, it has not been directly driven by facets of the pandemic such as the number of deaths caused or the racial identity of current victims. Yet news photographs in particular are said to have a particular indexical function – they are said to denote actuality. Thinking about the implications of this review of media coverage for the forthcoming survey of the photographic visualization of HIV/AIDS we need to ask:

(i) Will the photojournalism and documentary photograph function solely in denotative terms as a literal representation of actuality, or will it also function in connotative terms as a conceptual symbol of how we should orient ourselves to the pandemic?
NOTES

1 There are a few studies available dealing with national media contexts other than North America or Europe. Wu (2006) analyzes the Chinese Xinhua News Agency coverage since 2004, contrasting it to Associated Press reports on HIV/AIDS in China, revealing that each had a very different frame, with the former being pro-government and the latter critical. Analysis of the print media in India is found in de Souza (2007), who revealed a series of competing frames ranging from the idea of a war against AIDS to a concern with children and women as innocent victims. Wallis and Nerlich (2005), in a study of UK media, demonstrated how the war frame was common to coverage of HIV/AIDS but not replicated for other diseases such as SARS.

2 For studies that examine the heavily troped nature of early journalism about AIDS in Africa – replicating the colonial stereotypes discussed in section 2 – see Watney (1990) and Treichler (1991).

3 For studies that examine the focus on sexualized and somatic images in both the pictures and text of early media accounts, see Watney and Gupta (1986) and Austin (1989-90).