How Media Portrayal of the Outbreak of The AIDS Epidemic Changed Public Perception of the Gay Community

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Solo Exhibit

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I originally, when choosing my topic, wanted to do something related to the AIDS Epidemic, because of my particular interest in not only epidemiology, but also political science; it seemed like the perfect topic to merge the two concepts, and it remains to be a constant issue on the global stage today. Specifically, I wanted to see why it was still an issue, despite the quickness of creating a vaccine for COVID-19 by comparison. So, when I was originally researching the AIDS Epidemic, the first article of AIDS in the New York Times came up: "Rare Cancer Found in 41 Homosexuals," which highlighted to me a potential injustice towards the gay community.

When I was initially trying to refine my topic, finding the print-media coverage of the issue was a huge help in letting me understand what I wanted to do. I found my most helpful resources to be news articles covering the AIDS Epidemic, because it allowed me to see for myself the progression of its media portrayal, as well as the public perception *of* that media portrayal; it allowed me to see why advancements in the research of the disease could have been moving so slowly: because the epidemic mainly affected the gay community, the majority of the population didn't see this as a major issue, thus the lack of inaction, funding, and coverage stifled progression towards solving this issue.

My main issue with this project was finding hard data in a digestible format that displayed homophobia from the AIDS Epidemic specifically. Most of the studies about public opinion of homosexuality were somewhat vague, and didn't ask questions relevant to my topic. However, one source, by Tom W. Smith and Jaesok Son, was able to provide me with detailed information in a digestible format which showed a clear correlation between media coverage of the AIDS Epidemic and levels of homophobia in the public.

I would argue that this topic is incredibly important, because it shows a clear shift in how the public used to view homosexuality as a sin, and how this idea was extremely amplified when the gay community became scapegoated for the AIDS Epidemic. It is a prime example of how when a society focuses on blaming a certain community, the issue at hand can actually get worse. In addition, it is a terrifying example of how the media can blow things out of proportion incredibly quickly, because of its influence over the public (particularly in America).

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Altman, Lawrence K. "AIDS Is Now the Leading Killer of Americans from 25 to 44." *The New York Times*, January 31, 1995. https://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/31/science/aids-is-now-the-leading-killer-of-americans-from-25-to-44.html.
This is an article which provides an important milestone in AIDS history -- AIDS becoming the lead killer for Americans aged 25-44. I plan to use this statistic in my "post-turning point" section. This article helps put into perspective for me how even though there was not much media coverage to begin with, it still became a leading killer; it became a killer that no one thought would kill them.

———. "New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 11, 1982. Accessed January 20, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/11/science/new-homosexual-disorder-worries-health-officials.html.
This is one of the first articles from the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. In this article, I specifically used the title and its mentioning of G.R.I.D. (Gay-related immune disorder), meaning that the medical community and people at the time thought that there was a correlation between the disease and being gay, which we now know is not true -- being gay is part of your identity, and it doesn't affect your likeliness to get a disease, only your behavior can. This article really put into perspective for me how homophobic many major media outlets were -- even the New York Times is publishing harmful material like this.

———. "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), July 3, 1981, Front page, A20.
This was a source written to attempt to educate the public about updates of a "rare cancer" found in gay men. This cancer, called Kaposi Sarcoma, can, in reality, affect anyone, but it is often found linked to HIV/AIDS, therefore when there was an outbreak of HIV among gay men, (since people didn't know that HIV existed), it became known as the disease, when in reality, it was also a symptom of HIV. Since this article was from the front page of The New York Times, and since there was an already-existing stigma against gay people, this publication probably made people think that being gay meant that you were also able to get cancer, when in reality anyone can develop this. Later, this also developed into a stigma against those with HIV/AIDS. I plan to use both of these as evidence to back my claim. This article also helps me get a better understanding of how little people knew about HIV/AIDS when it was originally detected.

AP Photo, and Joe Sebo. Dr. James Curran, Head of the Task Force Studying Acquired Cellular Immuno-deficiency Reviews Lab Results in 1982. July 8, 1982. Photograph. Accessed January 5, 2024. https://images.wsj.net/im-174023/?width=700&size=1.5&pixel_ratio=1.5.
This is an image from 8 July 1982 which accompanied the 11 July 1982 issue of the Augusta Chronicle, from the article "Search for Cure to Unknown Killer Disease Is Classic Detective Story," in which Dr. James Curran (left) and technologist Bonnie Jones

are at the CDC studying lab results of AIDS patients. I plan to use this image in my exhibit for my project.

Augusta Chronicle (Augusta, Georgia), July 11, 1982. America's Historical Newspapers.
This article is a great representation of how media often depicted HIV/AIDS during the start of the outbreak; it uses cryptic descriptions and a bit of fear mongering to keep readers engaged, and while attempting to provide some information, the article leaves much room for interpretation and could lead people to drawing misinformation, particularly about the LGBTQIA+ community. I plan to use this source as a primary source of evidence for the media portrayal of the outbreak.

Augusta Chronicle (Augusta, GA). "Mystery Shrouds Diseases Striking Homosexual Men." August 29, 1981, 2. America's Historical Newspapers.
This source attempts to provide a bit of information on the current status of findings about HIV/AIDS, but doesn't clearly state how the disease is transmitted (since it was not known at the time). I plan to use this article as a primary source for how public status updates were written during the early days of the epidemic.

Bausum, Ann. *Viral: The Fight against AIDS in America*. 2019 ed. New York, NY: Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2019.
This is a book that recounts the history of the AIDS Epidemic in America. I specifically plan on using its recounts of the beginning of the outbreak, and how the public reacted to the outbreak, but since it also recounts some of the effects of the reactions to the outbreak up until 2019, I plan on using those as well.

Edmonds, Ron, and AP Photo. *RNC AIDS Activist Fisher*. August 19, 1992. Photograph. Accessed January 9, 2024. https://mapi.associatedpress.com/v1/items/5af5751ea0e5da11af9f0014c2589dfb/preview/AP920819091.jpg?wm=api&tag=app_id=1,user_id=undefined,org_id=undefined.
This is a photo of Mary Fisher, an AIDS Activist who spoke at the Republican National Convention in 1992. I plan to use this source as a visual for my exhibit board. This source helps me because I was able to learn about Mary Fisher's speech, and how it affected the public's perception of people with AIDS, from another source. Combining these two helps me have a visual for the information I found from another source.

Life Magazine. *Now No One Is Safe from AIDS*. July 1, 1985. Photograph. Accessed January 21, 2024. https://oldlifemagazine.com/july-01-1985-life-magazine.html.
This is a primary source from the cover of LIFE Magazine, which depicts the words, "Now No One Is Safe from AIDS". I plan to use this source as part of my "(non-endemic)" section, since it provides a visual for the expansion of media coverage, and how the media was finally able to tap into people's fears and get serious about the AIDS Epidemic. This source helps me get an understanding of how, especially after Rock Hudson came out with his HIV status, the general American public finally woke up to AIDS.

Lisker, Jerry. "Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad." *New York Daily News* (New York, NY), July 6, 1969. Newspapers.com.

This is a primary source which has a particularly striking article title; it serves as a piece written on the Stonewall Riots. I plan to use this article (and particularly its heading) as a means of conveying how homophobic much of the reporting on the gay community was, particularly among radical right-wing media (like the New York Daily News was at the time). This article helps me understand how crudely some media companies reported on the Stonewall Riots, and serves as a background for my topic.

Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "How Many of Us Will Be Alive for Stonewall 35? Verso: AIDS: Where Is Your Rage? ACT UP." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 20, 2024. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-1c8b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99
This is a primary source of a poster that was created by ACT UP trying to bring awareness to the epidemic. I plan to use this source as an example of one of the posters that ACT UP created that shows the link between progression in research of AIDS and gay rights. This source is helpful to me because it provides a visual for a point I am trying to make.

Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "Silence = Death Project. Silence = Death" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 20, 2024. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-3ec0-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99
This primary source was one of the most famous posters created by ACT UP, calling attention to the lack of media coverage and the scarcity of discussion about AIDS in the general public. I plan to use this source as a visual for the ACT UP organization, and to share one of the key elements in fighting an epidemic that is so stigmatized. This source is helpful to me because it lets me see a very clear message in a simplistic poster that is all too true for the scenario it's in -- if there is silence about the issue, it could affect an entire population without them hearing about it first.

Pear, Robert. "Health Chief Calls AIDS Battle 'No. 1 Priority.'" *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 25, 1983.
This article serves as a primary source that marks the details of the first announcement of the U.S. Health Chief that HIV/AIDS was the number 1 priority for health officials in the United States, but goes on to state that the general public has "no reason to panic," because the disease (at this point) had not moved out of high-risk groups. I plan to use this source to get information about the government's action towards the HIV/AIDS crisis during the VERY early days of the epidemic, and how the American population should act around PWAs. This information is useful to me, because it shows a stark contrast with how people were told to act around PWAs, as well as how medical professionals were supposed to attack the epidemic, and how both of these things were truly displayed in the following years.

Perez-Pena, Richard. "Albany Passes Bill Requiring H.I.V. Tracking." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 19, 1998.
This article provides details of the political response to HIV/AIDS, and how public health campaigns made their way into political enactment. This source also shows a lot of the opposition to some HIV/AIDS legislation because of potential invasions of privacy of PWAs. I plan to use the information regarding both of these covered topics, and it will

help me get a sense of the political atmosphere of HIV/AIDS legislation being enacted from opposing sides.

Speakes, Larry. "Press Briefing." Conference session at White House Press Briefing, Washington, DC, October 1982. Accessed December 13, 2023. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cohenaids/5571095.0487.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext.
This is the transcript of a press conference at the first time AIDS was brought up. Larry Speakes was the spokesperson for President Reagan, and a reporter, Rev. Lester Kinsolving was the first person to ask a question about the president's reaction to the AIDS crisis. At the time, Speakes had no idea about it, and after Kinsolving mentioned that it was spreading among the gay population, Speakes and the whole pressroom heckled him for asking a question, showing the absolute unprofessionalism and disrespect that people initially had for a very serious epidemic, just because of the demographic that it was common in. I plan to use this as a prime example of how society and politics continually downplayed the crisis because of the stigma that it had.

Trenton Evening Times (Trenton, NJ). "Rare Disease Tied to Kid Deaths." December 11, 1982, 1. America's Historical Newspapers.
This source specifically discusses some findings about HIV/AIDS prevalence in children, and how this information can be used to attempt to find a transmittable agent for the virus (while also providing a good story to make people connect with the article more). I plan to use the information about how the disease has affected children, and how this information was used by health officials to learn about the transmission of HIV/AIDS. This source is a primary news article, so it will help me provide a more rounded viewpoint of the depiction of HIV/AIDS, and how slow the development of transmission prevention methods was.

Wright, Chapin. "Mystery Ailment Struck Here." *Trenton Evening Times* (Trenton, NJ), December 14, 1982, 24. America's Historical Newspapers.
This source provides a local outlook on the HIV/AIDS issue, specifically in the state of New Jersey. It provides a lot of good information about how the disease has begun to strike populations outside of the at-risk populations, which could be interpreted as fear-mongering (but also just generally informative information). This source helps provide me a better outlook of how a news source could have reported about HIV/AIDS on a local level.

Secondary Sources

ACT UP (New York), AIDS ACTION NOW! (Toronto) , ""Montreal Manifesto"," *AIDS Activist History Project*, accessed January 18, 2024, https://aidsactivisthistory.omeka.net/items/show/67.
This is a primary source that has an image of the front cover of Le Manifeste De Montreal, which I explore the contents of from another source. I plan to use this source as a visual for my exhibit board. It also helps me put a visual to the analysis of its contents (which I learned about from another source).

Allison L. Greenspan, and James W. Curran. "Communicating Surveillance, Epidemiologic, and Laboratory Information on HIV Infection and AIDS." *Public Health Reports (1974-)* 106, no. 6 (1991): 721-26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4597042.
This source succinctly describes several findings from the CDC about HIV/AIDS chronologically. I plan to use the findings from the CDC to state how even in the medical community, there exists some stigmas and poor language to describe HIV/AIDS patients, and how this may have affected the public's view of patients, seeing as this is one of the most credible sources for medical information. I also plan to use this source to find out more about the medical advancements made in understanding HIV/AIDS, and how this could have played a role in HIV/AIDS legislation.

Altman, Dennis. "HIV, Homophobia, and Human Rights." *Health and Human Rights* 2, no. 4 (1998): 15-22. https://doi.org/10.2307/4065184.
This is a secondary source written to link homophobia to the political inaction towards the HIV/AIDS epidemic, in several parts of the world. I plan to use this source as a reference point for outlining the lack of progress that the United States and the international community made, even 17 years into the epidemic. This source helps me get an understanding of how the epidemic has also affected communities outside of the United States, and how AIDS is an issue that brings out certain faults in societies across the globe.

Avery, Alison, Justin Chase, Linda Johansson, Samantha Litvak, Darrel Montero, and Michael Wydra. "America's Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality, Civil Unions, and Same-Gender Marriage: 1977-2004." *Social Work* 52, no. 1 (2007): 71-79. JSTOR.
This article is a study of public attitudes towards different things related to the gay community and civil rights for gay people. I plan to use at least one of the charts from this article to show the general American population's disapproval of rights for gay people, and legalization of things like sodomy. This article helped me think about the correlation between media reporting of AIDS and the general population's outlook on gay rights.

Ayala, George, and Andrew Spieldenner. "HIV Is a Story First Written on the Bodies of Gay and Bisexual Men." *American Journal of Public Health* 111, no. 7 (2021): 1240-42. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2021.306348.
This article focuses on liberation movements of the gay community, and shares a lot of good information about the fight for gay rights. However, I specifically wanted to focus on one of the points that it brings up, which is the harmfulness of the name "G.R.I.D." (Gay-related immune disorder). It explains in detail how language is important when discussing anything, but especially things in the medical community (which is a commonly trusted source), and things in the media (which lots of people see). This article helped me see the true harm that the title "G.R.I.D" can cause.

Brodie, Mollyann, Elizabeth Hamel, Lee Ann Brady, Jennifer Kates, and Drew A. Altman. "AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic 1981-2002." *Columbia Journalism Review*, nos. March/April 2004 (2004). PDF.

This source provides a lot of good information (mainly statistics and statistical analysis) about the media coverage of HIV/AIDS from 1981 to 2002. I plan to use some of the information to back up how media in general was able to influence the public's view of the epidemic, especially in the early days. I plan to also cite some of the graphs that are displayed in this journal.

Elmore, Kim. "Southern Discomfort." *Southeastern Geographer* 46, no. 2 (2006): 215-30. JSTOR.
This journal is very thorough in its explanation of HIV/AIDS stigma, and how it can affect certain people's lives. I plan to use a lot of the information surrounding this stigma to emphasize the seriousness of the presence of stigma in American society. This source will help me get a better sense of how people with HIV/AIDS were often treated during the start of the epidemic.

Fitzsimons, Tim. "LGBTQ History Month: The Early Days of America's AIDS Crisis." *NBC News* (New York, NY), October 15, 2018. Accessed January 20, 2024. https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/lgbtq-history-month-early-days-america-s-aids-crisis-n919701.
This is a source which was written as a "look back" at LGBTQ+ fight for civil rights from before the AIDS Epidemic. I plan to use this source as part of my background, since it mentions quite a lot about the public perception of media coverage of the Stonewall Riots, as well as part of my turning point, since it provides a lot of good information about HIV/AIDS activism (particularly about ACT UP). This source helps me understand a good bit about public perception of the gay community *before* the AIDS Epidemic.

Leslie, Sharon. "HIV/AIDS: A Postmodern Epidemic and Its Depiction." *CHOICE: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 53, no. 7 (2016): 971+. Gale Literature Resource Center.
This journal provides great insight into the depiction of HIV/AIDS in the media, but also what has influenced people to change their points of view about HIV/AIDS. I plan to use some of the information regarding to what influenced people to change their minds, specifically points in politics and pop-culture that have allowed people to change their viewpoints. This source has provided me with a lot of insight as to how people are able to change their minds about something that they saw in the media, but also how pop-culture can help (or harm) a move to help a societal/political/medical issue.

Makinde, Toyin. "Pragmatic Acts in HIV/AIDS Social Management Advertisements." *Linguistik Online* 67, no. 5 (2014): 69+. Gale Literature Resource Center.
This is a source which provides information for how a public health campaign can be crafted to help increase awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS, whilst also attempting to eliminate stigma around the disease. While this article was originally attempted to help health campaigns targeted at HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness in Africa, many of these ideas can be used in campaigns elsewhere as well. I plan to use this information to contrast how public health campaigns should be written versus the crassness and uncarefulness that information about HIV/AIDS was let out.

"Name Brands: The Effects of Intrusive HIV Legislation on High-Risk Demographic Groups." *Harvard Law Review* 113, no. 8 (2000): 2098-115. https://doi.org/10.2307/1342321.

This article specifically analyzes legislation of HIV, and how many legislative acts have been specifically targeted towards minority groups with the disease, or groups that are more susceptible to contracting the disease because of pre-determined situations. This article also exposes many of the stigmas around those with HIV/AIDS, and how legislative acts must take this into account every time - this is what I plan to use. This source is also a good launching point for me to further discover how these legislative acts have been influenced by the media.

Nelkin, Dorothy. "AIDS and the News Media." *The Milbank Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (1991): 293-307. https://doi.org/10.2307/3350206.
This is a secondary source which provides so much good information about the media reporting of the AIDS crisis. This article touches on several points, such as the silence from talking about AIDS, the stigmatization of gay people in the media, and the influence of the gay community on media coverage in different locations. I plan to use this source to help inform my audience of some of these points, and to use the examples it mentions. This source will help me get a fuller understanding of why some newspapers were more verbose about the AIDS epidemic than others, and why there was such a spread of dangerous obscurity surrounding AIDS.

Ron, Aran, and David E. Rogers. "AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics." *Daedalus* 118, no. 2 (1989): 41-58. JSTOR.
This article directly states information that I plan to use, as its main focus is about the social and political responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis. I plan to use the information it provides as a place to find out the media's involvement in these social and political responses, and can help me find more potential sources which do so as well.

Shaw, Dan. "Defined by Words, Not by a Disease." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), August 22, 2012.
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/23/fashion/aids-activist-mary-fisher-is-defined-by-words-not-disease.html.
This is a source which analyzes the speech at the Republican National Convention in 1992 by Mary Fisher, an HIV/AIDS advocate and HIV survivor herself. I plan to not only use this source to show how influential truthful information can be when talking about HIV/AIDS, but also to show that Mary Fisher had an impact on many who weren't impacted before. This source helped me see the true impact of Mary Fisher's words at the RNC.

Smith, Tom W., and Jaesok Son. "Trends in Public Attitudes about Sexual Morality." In *National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago*. Last modified April 2013. https://www.norc.org/.
This source provides many visual graphs for understanding the public perception of sexual morality in different scenarios, and provides incredibly useful information about the perception of homosexual relations. I plan to use this source to show how a spike in disapproval of gay sexual relations occurred after the initial reporting of the outbreak, as well as the gradual increase in acceptance occurred as the media began reporting more, and reporting more accurate information. This source is helpful to me because it shows a

direct correlation between public perception and development of (the distribution of) information about HIV/AIDS.

Soller, Kurt. "Six Times Journalists on the Paper's History of Covering AIDS and Gay Issues." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 27, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/27/t-magazine/times-journalists-aids-gay-history.html.
This article describes how many news sources did not know exactly how to report on the issue of HIV/AIDS, and that when they did, it was often in a harmful way towards either the gay community, or people with AIDS. I plan to use this source and the examples it provides to further my argument that the media representation of HIV/AIDS became harmful to the gay community. This source helped me understand how influence from the gay community is necessary to provide information about HIV/AIDS in order to prevent the spread of harmful information that could directly or indirectly damage gay people's fight for equal rights and community acceptance.

Ware, Joshua. "Le Manifeste De Montréal." In *The Manifesto in Literature*, edited by Thomas Riggs, 306-08. Vol. 3. Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2013. Gale Literature Resource Center.
This source is an analysis of *Le Manifeste De Montréal*, which was a declaration to help eliminate HIV/AIDS in the world in 1990. It outlines several guidelines for national health ministries to follow throughout the world in order to effectively eliminate HIV/AIDS, and help PWAs (medically and in their societies). I plan to use this information to understand how a public health system should act when dealing with HIV/AIDS, and how political action should take HIV/AIDS and PWAs into account. This source will help me understand *Le Manifeste De Montréal* better.