

## Media Framing on the HIV/AIDS Related Epidemic

Mohd Shahnawi Muhmad Pirus\*  
Ilias Md. Salleh  
Mokhtar Muhammad

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

\*Correspondence email:  
[shahnawi654@salam.uitm.edu.my](mailto:shahnawi654@salam.uitm.edu.my)

### **Abstract**

*Media plays an important role in the social landscape that helps to shape audience perceptions and it also facilitates public discourse and debate by defining acceptable parameters for discussion. According to Collins (2004), media serves as sense-makers to world and become the primary presenters of ideology for the large audience consumption, integrating the fact that media is vital as most commonly shared source of information. Controversial social issues and concerns become the common strengths for the conventional and mainstream media practices and it is represented in various media context (Hart, 1999). Based on Hart's view, Piontek (1992) also claimed the issues on sexuality especially on homosexuality is dominantly geared by the media representation. He added these representations are fundamentally equipped with the intention to strengthen the society's knowledge and perception towards their understanding on epidemic diseases such as the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).*

**Keyword:** *Media framing, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome/ Human Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS/HIV), Audience perceptions, Audience consumption, Epidemic diseases.*

## **Pembingkaihan Media Mengenai Wabak Penyakit Berjangkit Berkaitan HIV/AIDS**

### **Abstrak**

*Media berperanan penting dalam lanskap sosial kerana ianya membentuk persepsi audien dan mempengaruhi wacana awam dengan membina parameter yang sesuai terhadap sesuatu perkara. Menurut Collins (2004), media adalah sumber rujukan sejagat yang utama dalam mempersembahkan ideologi kepada audien untuk digunakan. Oleh itu, media adalah sumber utama maklumat. Kontroversi dan keperluan terhadap isu-isu sosial juga menjadi pemangkin utama kepada praktis media arus perdana dan konvensional dan ianya dipersembahkan dalam pelbagai konteks media (Hart, 1999). Berdasarkan kepada pandangan Hart ini, Piontek (1992) menyarankan bahawa isu berkaitan seksualiti terutamanya perihal homoseksualiti telah dikawal oleh representasi media. Beliau turut menegaskan bahawa representasi terancang itu bertunjangkan keperluan memperkasakan persepsi dan pengetahuan masyarakat mengenai wabak penyakit berjangkit seperti AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).*

**Kata Kunci:** *Pembingkaihan media, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome/Human Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS/HIV), Persepsi audien, Kepenggunaan audien, Wabak penyakit-penyakit berjangkit.*

## **Introduction**

Technically, the growth of epidemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS related spreads has defined of the disease is, including the practices that conceptualize it and the respond towards its representation by the media. In the analysis by Brodie et al., (2004), the role played by media in conveying medical information shaped the society's mentality of their understanding on AIDS/HIV related epidemic. This justification was supported with Radford (1996) and Tannen (2003) when their findings met the similar virtues revealed that younger generations are dependable on media as their top preferences of information searching regarding sexual health issues.

Grmek (1990) justifies the portrayal of AIDS by the media started as early as in 1981 as the consequence of sexual deviance brought by the homosexuals. At that particular period of time, homosexuality and AIDS were inseparable linking these major setbacks to these sexual minorities and their preferred lifestyles. Such major setbacks included the discovery of cases of male homosexual diagnosed with Kaposi sarcoma which was also known to the society as 'gay cancer'. It was followed by the widespread of disease known as pneumocystis carinii contracted by several male homosexuals. Grmek (ibid) added these two common spreads of diseases was referred to as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), a newly emerging disease discovered due to the homosexual's lifestyle. Gross (2001) emphasized the GRID was adopted to more generic term known as AIDS in 1982 after the Center for Disease Control (CDC) found this disease was not only widespread amongst homosexuals but also prone to other risk groups such as the drug users and people with blood genetic disorder such as hemophilia.

Based on Gross's view, the AIDS panic began to spread once it was also involving other related diseases that could infect the general population that comes from various walks of life including children and both heterosexual men and women. According to Rogers, Singer and Imperio (1993), AIDS became the world's main concern in 1990 when the number of infected people was increased. This situation had shaped public perception concerning ;(i) the urge for the policy makers dealing with the issues, and (ii) the needs for medical advancements to cater for the world's population who are diagnosed with AIDS. This urgency was sparked in tandem with the rapid increase in AIDS among the diagnosed sexual minorities (between 1991 to 1996), when it was reported AIDS became a major factor of death among African-American male and female from the age of 25 to 44-year-old (Pickle, Quinn, and Brown, 2002). Revealing the same fact, Hart (1999) and Lehrman (2004) the cases of AIDS were reported greatly in the media as the result from heterosexual blood transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) to women and adolescents. As a matter of fact, the HIV continued to spread excessively throughout the nations with major representation from the low income-demographic citizens leading as the majority diagnosed with HIV (Brodie, Hamel, Brady, Kates, and Altman, 2004; UNAIDS, 2004).

UNAIDS (2004) reveals AIDS is the collection of symptoms and infections linked to the most severe and advanced stages of HIV which refused to be transmitted through water, nonsexual contact, as simple as breathing the same air of an infected person. Levitt and Rosenthal (1999) stressed the fact that the exchange of bodily fluids (such as blood and semen) is necessary for the transmission of the virus in which may progress to AIDS. They added the specific ways of contracting the virus include anal and vaginal sexual intercourse, receiving transfusions from infected blood, and sharing needles practices such as the infected pregnant women may pass the virus to their unborn. Bell (2006) however claimed although AIDS and HIV have been a serious malady for particular societal groups, there is no identifiable demographic characteristics in detecting potential individuals who are at risk due to their behavioural choices and actions which put them at greater risk for contracting HIV.

## **Media Framing**

Given this background, it gave us the direction on the importance for the society to be updated on these contagious diseases. Reese (2003) described the framing of AIDS and HIV related diseases as an exercise practiced by the media in penetrating the audiences' minds and it involves selection and salience. Based on Reese's conceptual of idea, media framing is vital to be practiced since it carries the issue of power with the function to define the context of an occurrence, highlighting distinguishable elements and controlling the interpreted elements. In other words, media framing is a socialization strategy that has powerful implications for the way people react and act toward social issues and events, particularly with the affects of people's understanding of media's posture and their relationship with social and political world. Thus, media framing affects the understanding and perceptions on social reality among citizens (Baylor, 1996; Entman, 1993; Hertog and McLeod, 2003; Jamieson and Waldman, 2003; McQuail, 2000).

On another note, Pickle, Quinn and Brown (2002, p.430) stated the media framing able to help people to notice, understand, evaluate, remember issues, and choose to be responsive to such situations. Meanwhile, Bell (2006) justified that a characterized description of framing relates to

the frame of a picture. Based on this direction, it helps us to explain on the focus on the fact that framing is to highlight specific components of issues by establishing on certain border. The function of this border is to guide the audiences' focus in keeping track on certain events or issues. In short, the frame only allows media participant to focus on selected content purposefully and shown within its frontiers lifted out the least important information from the news frame.

In the context of AIDS, Clarke (1992) referred framing as the way in which mainstream media package and disseminate information on the epidemic by considering the structural and institutional norms influenced the process of framing which led to the depiction of mass media influencing the way society reacts and respond to the information received. Bardhan (2001, p. 287) extended his views in emphasizing the media framing as renditions of events and issues defined on its legitimacy according to certain timeline. This justification was supported by Gross (2001) when he mentioned media is the main agent in cultivating and shaping ones' thoughts of certain events and groups which comes along with learning opportunity (p.11). Therefore, the media played a pivotal role in shaping people's perceptions of those who were contracted with HIV-positive and those who acquired AIDS by locating the disease in the circle of homosexual lifestyle. Bardhan (2001) emphasizes AIDS coverage by the media commonly placed within the following frames including: (i) victimization; (ii) deviance and abnormality; (iii) blame attribution; and (iv) the power of modern medicine to develop a miracle cure.

The early mainstream media coverage on AIDS and HIV related diseases started with the socio-political issue. However, less focus was given to the transmission of the newly discovered virus (Alwood, 1996; Gross, 2001; Hertog, Finnegan and Kahn, 1994). Levitt and Rosenthal (1999) stressed the mainstream media is dependable to the political leadership in taking its cues, in responding to the attempt in regulating male homosexual's overt sexual behaviour with the related illness. Unfortunately, Levitt and Rosenthal's proactive steps encountered great limitations since the government refused to expand their research efforts towards the enhancement of health-care provisions, including the efforts to provide educational and preventive services. The government reticence was

fought by non-governmental AIDS service organizations, which played a vital role in the creation of support and educational services. Alwood (1996) stresses AIDS was generally viewed as a disease afflicting the isolated world of homosexuals due to these sexual minorities' preserved and immoral lifestyle. This justification is similar to Gross (2001) when he stressed the mainstream mass media decided to deny on such coverage of epidemic spreads since its involved beyond the risk group. Gross added although being ignored by the mainstream media, the alternative media run by the homosexuals associations decided to take charge in giving coverage on the epidemic disseminating the setbacks of the disease to the society. Lander (1988) in his analysis discovered the fact that the mainstream media through its coverage were ambiguous in their description of AIDS transmission for fear of offending the potential readers, viewers, or advertisers. To worsen the situation due to the uncertain portrayal of AIDS/HIV with its potential ways of transmission by the mainstream media, it was contributed to the consistent stigmatization of male homosexuals and their deviant lifestyle (Piontek, 1992).

Treichler (1999, p. 32-33) explains the coverage of AIDS/HIV and other related diseases was easily associated with the male homosexuals' minority when it commonly appeared on the mainstream media coverage since it was framed as a universal problem worldwide. For example, several headlines of mainstream media coverage on AIDS/HIV and other related diseases came out in numbers such as "us versus them" was prevalent which set the stage for AIDS to be depicted in the media as "gay plague, the price paid for anal intercourse", or "the disease that turn fruits into vegetables" were greatly dichotomized in the media (Bell, 2006). Hence, from those depictions, AIDS was officially framed as a universal problem perpetuated the male homosexuals' involvements (Altman, 1986; Netzhammer and Shamp, 1994) referring this sexual minority as *them* while Epstein (1995) found that certain mainstream media officials referring people with AIDS as other which disrupted the boundaries of; (i) gender, (ii) race, (iii) sexuality, and (iv) nationality (Bardhan, 2001, p. 238). Bardhan justified such coverage given the consistency parameters of homosexuality and heterosexuality, depicting the great comparison of being someone who is physically healthy and vice versa (p. 284). Based on Brodie et al. (2004), the news media coverage on AIDS/ HIV

and other related diseases in 1981 focusing on the male homosexuals as prime subject with the deviance and abnormality frame, observing more sensational aspects of the disease including the fear it generated amongst the population or its connections to homosexuality (Lewitt and Rosenthal, 1999).

## **Media Coverage on Individuals Sexuality**

Albert (1986) highlights that media coverage was focusing more on the sexuality of individuals with the diseases rather than portraying the possible aspects in cure searching for the epidemic. Albert (ibid, p. 135) justified early media portrayals of AIDS/HIV were prone to link to sexual promiscuity making the morality values as a common solution to avoid the disease. Gross (2001) claimed AIDS risen the issue in making society aware on the importance of fighting the disease with suggested way of life by the medical practitioners who were much influenced with the associations of sexual permissiveness among homosexuals as what being defined by the mainstream media (ibid, p. 95). Similar justification by Fumento (1993), where the mainstream media officials keep targeting the sexual minority as prime subject in depicting the disease, providing a misconception of security to general mankind that augmented homosexuality as subject to be shunned and avoided. He added it seemed obvious when the mainstream media deliberately misled the society about the chances of every individual contracting AIDS/HIV and other related diseases regardless of sexuality.

However, the trend of portraying homosexuality and AIDS/HIV tracked on changes in the late 1980s (Bardhan, 2001) when a heterosexual celebrity Rock Hudson was living with AIDS (p. 290), signaling the turning point in national consciousness on AIDS (Bird, 1996). As a matter of fact, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) broadcast more than 200 stories on AIDS, a significant number of stories the network used to air over the previous years (Gross, 2001). From this discussion, it gives the direction the increase of AIDS coverage represented in the mainstream media has changed the perception of the disease towards the people living with AIDS/HIV (Bardhan, 2001; Bird, 1996; Rogers, Singer and Imperio, 1993). The increase of quantity on AIDS/HIV coverage contributed to

the shift of newsworthiness on this disease (Bell, 2006). For example, the mainstream media coverage of AIDS involving individuals who contracted the disease through blood transfusion were greatly reported and considered as informative resulting in changes of public policy and legislation addressing on the discrimination issues.

What about the representation of AIDS/HIV and its related diseases on television? According to Pilipp and Shull (1993), television content started to air related movie on AIDS/HIV as it began to acknowledge the disease in the middle of 1980s. For example, the prime-time movie about an individual with AIDS featured on *An Early Frost* on National Broadcasting Channel (NBC) in 1985 establishing the needs for the society to understand the reality of individual with the disease (Netzhammer and Shamp, 1994). *An Early Frost* with other similar shows were confronted with the challenge on how the issue of AIDS and individuals with the disease should be depicted. As expected, criticisms were mainly on the issue of homosexuality with the focus on the plot around homosexual of white males as the main subject (Netzhammer and Shamp, 1994). Pilipp and Shull (1993) claimed most of the shows failed to emphasize on the experiences of infected individuals rather than portraying the plot of homosexual characters as bowing down to the pressure of audience ratings. Most criticisms were concerned on how the shows were supposed to be informative in seeking on how the infected individuals deal with the disease that comes along with various challenges they had to face. This justification was supported with Clarke (1992):

*The person with AIDS was portrayed as a diseased person, as morally repugnant, hopelessly, doomed, and isolated from potentially significant sources of emotional support such as lovers and family members. They (media) focus on sexual practices, drug use, the fear of contagion, and the uncertainty about the causes of the contagion (p. 117).*

From Clarke's analysis, the homosexual community responded to these skewed depictions by establishing the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) in addressing the strategic ways mainstream media's handling of AIDS-related contents on television. A consequence of this, the attention shifted to the demographic characteristics of individuals



with AIDS, reframing the story plot with more universal issues, broaden its scope especially on the involvement of infected heterosexuals which caused great impact to the society. Rogers, Singer, and Imperio (1993) in their analysis found there was still a lack of newsworthiness on AIDS as universal epidemic in mainstream media coverage although the amount of highlights on the issues was soaring high.

Based on Rogers and colleagues' review, there should be no specific segregation in categorizing AIDS/HIV to be associated on one's sexuality. For example, the death of prominent celebrities such as Rock Hudson, the retirement of National Basketball Association (NBA) world tennis player Earvin Johnson due to AIDS/HIV infection as a result of promiscuous heterosexual context, and the national tennis star Arthur Ashe living with AIDS from a blood transfusion are the generic evidences that promote on the diversity of AIDS/HIV transmissions.

Pickle, Quinn and Brown (2002) however monitored this trend of mainstream media from being ignorant to very concern on framing the AIDS/HIV and other related diseases as a widespread epidemic. The focus was beginning to shift from being skewed to sexuality portrayal to the depiction of more universal factors. For example, Fumento (1993) noted that several headlines from mainstream newspapers including the one by Newsweek written in specific direction, "AIDS is not their disease but *ours*" and similarly the *U.S. News & World Report* headline read, "the disease of them is suddenly the disease of us" and the one from *USA Today*, "Cases Rising Fast Among Heterosexuals" were the sorts of remarks that paralleled with the changes.

Levitt and Rosenthal (1999) claimed the society began to show support as the coverage of AIDS/HIV was consistently increased. For example, the public began to recognize the importance of AIDS/HIV awareness by organizing the fundraising and commemorative events for AIDS research and development, and also came up with the trend of wearing red ribbons and creating quilts for the support of AIDS/HIV victims.

## **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome/Human Immunodeficiency Virus (AIDS/HIV)**

The shift on AIDS/HIV coverage has extended too especially in the promotion of sexual morality including the abstinence and use of prophylactics as a form of protection against the disease. Several communication scholars including Bell (2006), Bardhan (2001) and Epstein (1995) observed the pattern of various media outlets including the music and entertainment industry that had incorporated to produce public service announcements and other related health messages on AIDS/HIV to listeners. This is due to the fact that the involvement of media, such as in music enhances the chance for the information to be well disseminated by the involvement of specific icons such as music artists over the news media representation. However, the coverage on AIDS/HIV was started to decline until it was not the main focus to be highlighted to the society when most featured stories on the disease were about entertainment media (such as celebrity stories, or scandal) or medical stories involving the discovery of the latest treatment procedures and any other public health measures (Bardhan, 2001; Pickle, Quinn, and Brown, 2002).

Brodie et al. (2004) underline the coverage on AIDS/HIV epidemic by the media was declining and when the number of prime-time shows featuring on the issues seemed to have fallen drastically, despite the fact that the number of AIDS cases continued to grow. They added the news coverage by the mainstream media on AIDS/HIV matters would only be functioning when a potential new treatment or possible cure for the disease is being researched. As a matter of fact, UNAIDS (2004) had observed the framing on AIDS/HIV became a global pandemic when it was discovered that about 90% of individuals with the disease were living in Third World regions specifically in South Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America (p. 24). As Brodie et al. (2004) explained, it is a traditional news practice for such epidemic disease to become a global issue. This situation somehow shifted the coverage on AIDS/HIV cases in Africa when the country representing about 66% of the people with the disease (UNAIDS, 2004; West, 2004). Brodie and colleagues claimed

that the decline and change in media coverage of AIDS/HIV over time coincided with a change in the nature of the disease being perceived, juggling the hope that people who live with this epidemic still can be treated and cured.

Other efforts in sustaining AIDS/HIV awareness among society could be seen in several campaigns by several associations including the one run by Black Entertainment Television's (BET) on *Rap It Up* of AIDS prevention campaigns, created to persuade young viewers in employing and embracing safer sex tactics (Bell, 2006). However, the media continued to disregard the changing demography of the epidemic, still, perpetuating the connection between AIDS and homosexuality even though the increase in the number of AIDS/HIV from heterosexuality was also alarming (Hart, 1999). For example, the depiction of individuals with AIDS/HIV by the media as the prime target was rarely skewed to racial minorities including the youth, and women, but homosexuals. According to UNAIDS (2004), the number of African-American with AIDS/HIV was greater than the whites community in 1996, and the statistics steadily increased by 37% of all new infections every year, however, only 3% of media stories represented the racial minorities.

## **Conclusion**

From this perspective, it gave us the indicator that the coverage of AIDS/HIV among other races throughout the world was crying foul for attention since their existence was least covered from the coverage and discussion about the disease altogether (Brodie, Hamel, Brady, Kates, and Altman, 2004; Wright, 2004), following the similar pattern of media coverage of women who represented 50% of the individuals with HIV in 2002, a gradual increase by 41% in 1997 (UNAIDS, 2004). These sorts of depictions were problematic since it reinforced and legitimized the notion that AIDS is greatly associated with homosexuality, thereby diminishing the magnitude and complexity of the epidemic. In other words, mainstream media continued to protect the establishment of heterosexist ideologies through the misrepresentation of AIDS/HIV as a disease that resulted as a consequence of the homosexuality practices,

whereby ignoring the fact that heterosexual individuals contributed to the disease existence as well.

What are the consequences of AIDS/HIV coverage by the media? According to Entman (1991), the coverage of AIDS/HIV in the news and entertainment media has evolved. However, the dominant frames that emerged from this epidemic over time carried significant implications for individuals' attitudes, cultural interpretation, and policy outcomes. The decision on who to be depicted by the media in tabling the discussions on AIDS/HIV is always critical to the policy decisions with the influence of public perception. Based on Entman's views, this component is vital to be considered due to the increasing numbers of AIDS/HIV cases found in under developed communities worldwide. However, the coverage of this epidemic reflected on the opportunity of broadening our focus to a more global perspective, making sense of the shift on media framing all over the world since media is still the mechanism opted to influence the direction by controlling the dissemination of information on the disease. To conclude, while the direction on AIDS/HIV coverage by the media is progressing, somehow it is still in the limitations of people's perception, believing the involvement on homosexuals as the great contribution to the epidemic.

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