

AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic 1981-2002

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HIV/AIDS took the U.S. by surprise in the 1980s, and it continues to be a health epidemic with unique characteristics. As a news topic, HIV/AIDS has not only been a health story, but also one about arts, culture, taboo, sexuality, religion, celebrity, business, and politics on the local, national, and global stage. Media coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has, at times, helped shape the policy agenda, while also reflecting current policy discussions, debates and important events. In many cases, the news media have served as an important source of information about the epidemic for the public. In an October 2003 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 72% of the U.S. public said that most of the information they get about HIV/AIDS comes from the media, including television, newspapers, and radio¹.

Recently, there has been a growing discussion about the scope and focus of news coverage of HIV/AIDS by the U.S. news media. Questions have been raised about whether there is "AIDS fatigue" on the part of media organizations. Journalists report great difficulty in persuading their news organizations to run HIV/AIDS stories. Critics say coverage of global HIV is inadequate and coverage of the HIV epidemic in the United States is disappearing. Some also question the balance of topics covered in HIV news, particularly with regard to coverage of treatment versus prevention. Others say that, in fact, there have been few fundamentally new scientific developments in the HIV epidemic recently, and that for the most part, HIV is not "news."

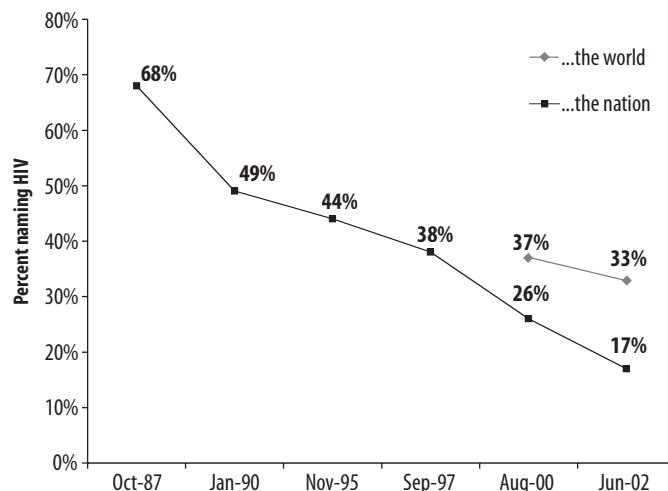
Over the last few years, there has also been a decline in the share of the U.S. public viewing HIV/AIDS as the nation's most urgent health problem (see Public Opinion side box). It is difficult to measure a cause-effect relationship between public opinion and media coverage. Yet, the old adage that the media doesn't tell the public what to think, but does tell them what to think *about*, suggests that declining coverage of HIV/AIDS in the news might have some relationship to the public's declining perception of the urgency of the problem. Ultimately, coverage of HIV/AIDS by mainstream news media serves as one important gauge of how prominent the issue is on the policy and cultural agenda of the nation, and how overall attention to the epidemic has changed over time, both in terms of quantity and content.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, in conjunction with Princeton Survey Research Associates, conducted a comprehensive examination of media coverage of HIV/AIDS over the 22-year time period from the first news reports in 1981

through December 2002. This study seeks to answer questions such as: Has the amount of coverage of the epidemic increased or decreased over time? How have the topics covered changed? How has coverage of AIDS in the U.S. fared? What about coverage of the global epidemic? How often do stories strive to educate the public about transmission, prevention, testing, and treatment? What is the balance of optimism versus pessimism in AIDS coverage? Are there important differences between print and broadcast coverage?

Public Opinion: The proportion of Americans naming HIV/AIDS as the nation's number one health problem has been steadily declining over time (Chart 1). In 1987, nearly seven in ten Americans (68%) named HIV/AIDS as the most urgent health problem facing the nation in an open-ended question, and it ranked as the number one cited problem through 1997. By 2002, 17% named HIV/AIDS in the same question, as more responses focused on cancer, health care costs, health insurance, and access to health care. Americans are now more likely to name HIV/AIDS as the most urgent health problem facing the world than as the most urgent health problem facing the nation.

Chart 1. Percent naming HIV/AIDS as the most urgent health problem facing the nation/world



Sources: Gallup Poll Oct-1987; Kaiser Family Foundation surveys 1990-2002

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation *Health Poll Report* survey, conducted October 3-5, 2003.

The analysis presented here is based on a sample of more than 9,000 total news stories from major U.S. print and broadcast sources, including four major national newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*), three major regional papers in areas particularly hard-hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic (the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Miami Herald*, and the *Los Angeles Times*), and three major network news programs (ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News). Stories were also coded from *The London Times* for comparison to U.S. print media. (Note: all findings refer to coverage from U.S. media outlets only, unless otherwise noted.)

The study covers the time period from 1981 through 2002. For ease of reporting findings, certain years were grouped together according to stages and key events in the epidemic. The groupings used throughout this report are:

- 1981 – 1986: Early years of the epidemic, the Reagan years
- 1987 – 1990: Increased attention to epidemic, advent of AZT, first Bush presidency
- 1991 – 1995: Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe, Clinton presidency
- 1996 – 1999: Introduction of protease inhibitors, more people “living with HIV/AIDS”
- 2000 – 2002: Increased attention to the global epidemic, second Bush presidency

FINDINGS

Volume of Coverage Over Time and Key Events

Since the late 1980’s, there has been a decrease in total media coverage of HIV/AIDS. During the 22-year time period from 1981 to 2002, there were more than 41,000 news stories about HIV/AIDS in the selected media outlets, including over 39,000 print stories and more than 2,000 broadcast stories². For the newspapers and broadcasts included in this study, total coverage of HIV/AIDS increased during the early 1980’s, peaked at over 5,000 stories in 1987, and declined steadily to fewer than 1,000 stories in 2002. While this decline in coverage follows a similar pattern to the number of new AIDS cases being diagnosed in the U.S. (Chart 2), the decline in media coverage began about 6 years before the decline in cases, and continued even as the cumulative number of AIDS cases diagnosed in the U.S. rose above 500,000 (Chart 3).

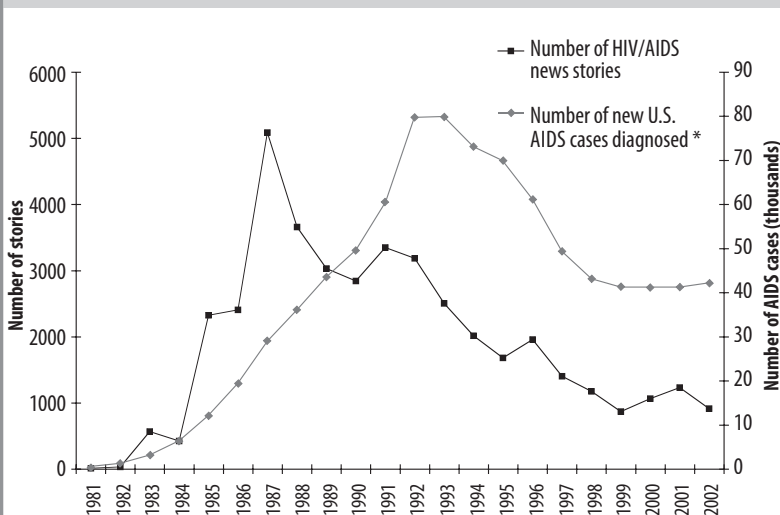
Minor peaks in coverage after 1987 were driven by major developments in the epidemic, occurring in 1991 (Magic Johnson’s announcement that he was HIV positive), 1996 (the introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapy), and 2001 (increased attention to the global epidemic).

Coverage reflected key news-generating events. Media coverage of HIV/AIDS generally reflected key events that have occurred over the history of the epidemic (Table 1). In the early 1980’s, media coverage of AIDS was dominated by the initial CDC reports of “gay pneumonia” (83% of stories in 1981; 50% in 1982), stories about AIDS and the country’s blood supply (peaking at 15% of stories in 1985), the closing of San Francisco bathhouses (13% in 1984), and the Reagan administration’s response to AIDS (6% in 1983). Between 1987 and 1990, there was not a single major story that dominated media coverage, though there was continued coverage of the Reagan administration’s response (8% of stories in 1987), as well as coverage of the introduction of AZT (5% in 1989) and the International AIDS Conference in San Francisco (7% in 1990). Between 1991 and 1995, the biggest HIV/AIDS news story was Magic Johnson’s announcement that he was HIV positive (16% of stories in 1992). This time period also included coverage of tennis player Arthur Ashe’s death from AIDS (5% of stories in 1992), the Clinton Administration’s response to the disease (5% in 1993), and stories about HIV/AIDS and U.S. immigration (5% in 1993). Beginning in 1996, coverage began to focus on the introduction of protease inhibitors and combination therapy to treat people with HIV (13% of stories in 1997), as well as Magic Johnson’s return to professional basketball (5% in 1996), continued coverage of the Clinton Administration’s response (6% in 1997), and increasing attention to international AIDS conferences (6% in 1996 and 1998; 8% in 2000; 11% in 2002). Finally, between 2000 and 2002, the focus of HIV/AIDS media coverage shifted to the emerging stories of HIV/AIDS in Africa (peaking at 14% in 2000); the debate over drug prices and patents (12% in 2001); and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (6% in 2001).

While those who closely follow the AIDS epidemic – and even some who do not – will remember these key events, it’s important to note that most of these stories did not account for more than one to two percent of coverage overall during the 22-year time period (Magic Johnson accounted for the highest share of overall coverage at 3%). In addition to news-generating events, there were a few other recurring themes that did not emerge or dominate in any particular year, but did account for small but significant shares of coverage overall, including living with HIV/AIDS (5% overall), AIDS and the blood supply (4%), international AIDS conferences (3%), AIDS activism (2%), and AIDS vaccine development (2%).

Other stories that might have been expected to emerge as key news-generating events never garnered more than 5% of HIV media coverage in any given year, including stories about Ryan White, an Indiana teenager with hemophilia who contracted HIV and fought to be allowed to attend public school (peaking at 3% in 1986); the incident in Florida in which the Ray family was burned out of their home (peaking at 3% in 1987); the Helms amendment (peaking at 1% in 1986); the National Commission on AIDS (peaking at 2% in 1989, 1990, and 1992); the case of Kimberly Bergalis, who contracted HIV from her dentist (peaking at 4% in 1991); World AIDS day (peaking at 4% in 1994 and 1998); and the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS (peaking at 1% in 1997 and 1998).

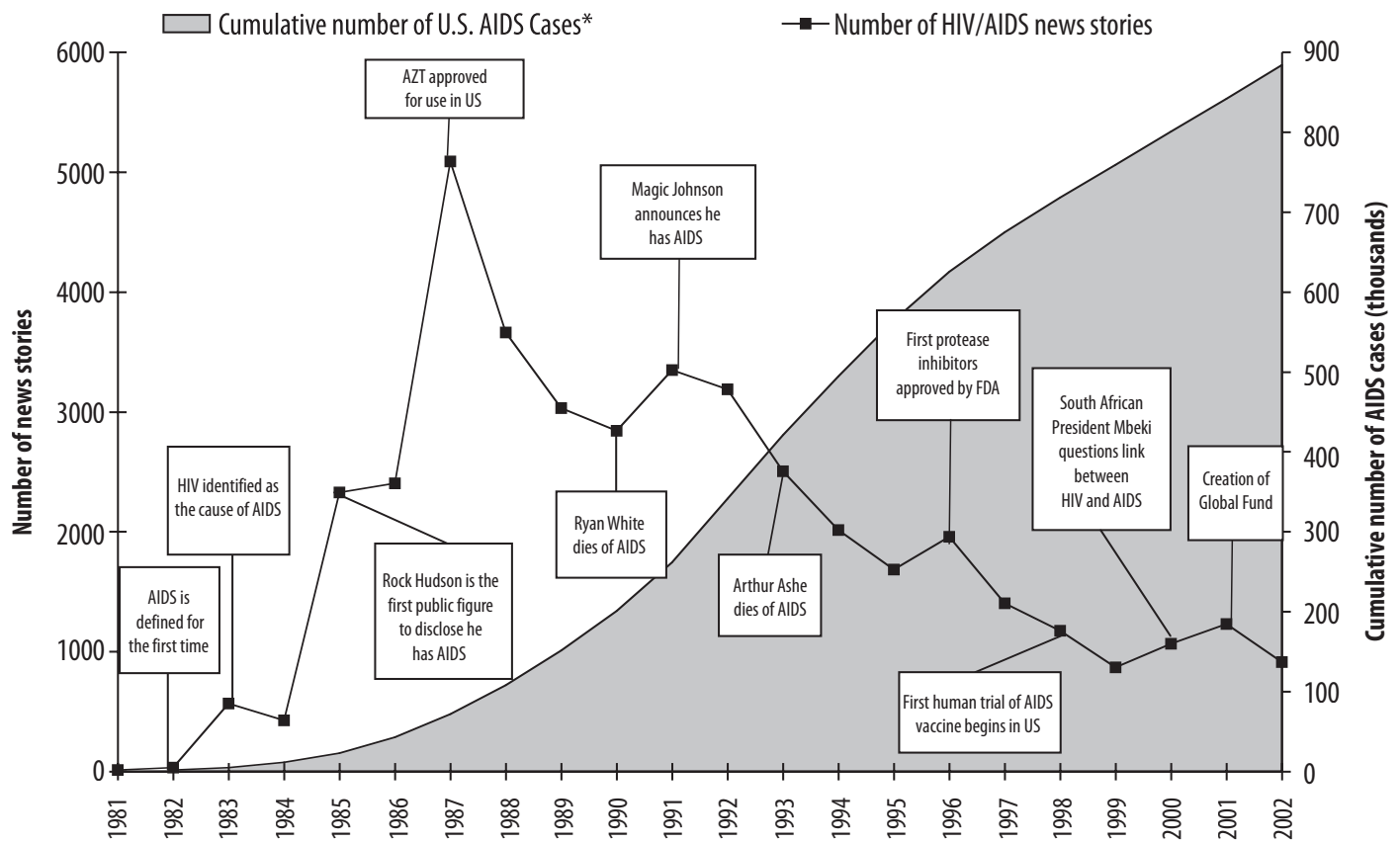
Chart 2. Total number of HIV/AIDS news stories in selected media outlets and number of new U.S. AIDS cases diagnosed by year



*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

² This number is likely to be a slight underestimate, since not all media sources were included in the earliest years of the study – see Methodology section for full details.

Chart 3. Total number of HIV/AIDS news stories in selected media outlets with key events and cumulative U.S. AIDS cases over time

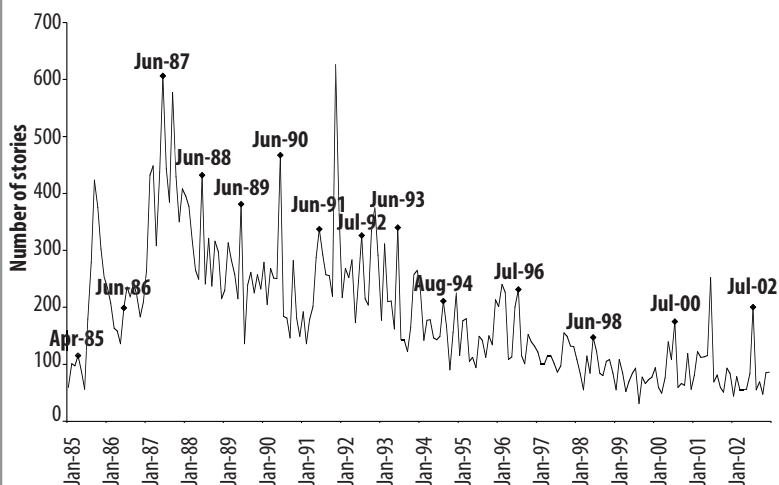


*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Table 1. Percent of stories covering key news-generating events/recurring themes by year

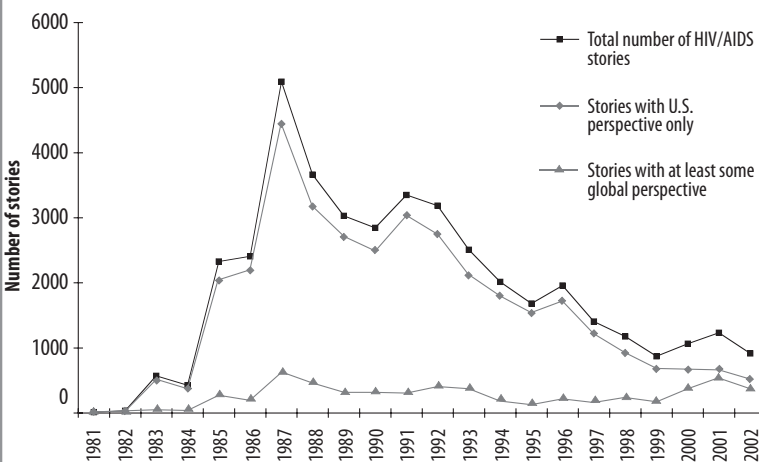
Event/Recurring Theme	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total	
Initial CDC Reports	83%	50%	4%	3%	1%	<1%			<1%												<1%		<1%	
Official designation re: "AIDS"		12%	<1%			<1%	<1%					<1%										<1%		<1%
AIDS and blood supply		12%	12%	11%	15%	6%	3%	3%	2%	4%	4%	4%	5%	2%	2%	4%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%	4%	
Reagan administration response			6%	2%	2%	3%	8%	2%	<1%				<1%											2%
HIV virus isolated			1%	7%	<1%	2%	1%		<1%	1%	1%	1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%							<1%	1%
San Francisco bathhouses closed			1%	13%	1%	<1%										1%			1%					<1%
Living w/HIV/AIDS		3%	3%	5%	3%	6%	7%	2%	2%	3%	6%	6%	4%	11%	1%	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%	2%	3%	5%	
Rock Hudson & AIDS					7%	1%		<1%	1%	<1%	<1%											<1%	<1%	1%
AZT						4%	3%	2%	5%	3%	3%	2%	2%	3%	3%	1%	2%	2%	3%	1%	<1%	<1%	2%	
International AIDS Conferences			1%		<1%	1%	2%	3%	4%	7%	2%	3%	3%	2%	4%	6%	<1%	6%		8%	1%	11%	3%	
Magic Johnson and AIDS											12%	16%	1%	1%	2%	5%	1%				1%	<1%	3%	
Arthur Ashe and AIDS												5%	3%	<1%										1%
Clinton Administration response												1%	5%	3%	2%	3%	6%	4%	1%	5%				1%
AIDS and U.S. immigration			<1%			1%	1%	<1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	5%	1%	1%	<1%						<1%		1%
Protease inhibitors/combo therapy										<1%	<1%	1%	<1%	<1%	3%	7%	13%	10%	10%	6%	4%	4%	2%	
HIV/AIDS in Africa			1%	<1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	<1%	1%	1%	<1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%	3%	7%	14%	13%	11%	2%	
Drug prices/patent debates				<1%	<1%		<1%	1%	1%	<1%	1%		<1%		<1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	4%	12%	4%	1%	
Global Fund																				1%	6%	4%	<1%	
U.N. and AIDS			<1%	<1%			<1%	1%	1%	1%			1%	1%	<1%	<1%	1%	2%		4%	5%	3%	1%	
AIDS Activism/ACT UP		3%	1%			1%	2%	2%	4%	2%	3%	2%	1%	<1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	2%
AIDS Vaccine Development			<1%	2%	1%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%	2%	1%	3%	2%	2%	2%	4%	3%	2%	
World AIDS Day								<1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%	4%	1%	2%	1%	4%	2%	1%	1%	3%	1%	

Chart 4. Number of HIV/AIDS stories per month, with international AIDS conference months highlighted



Over time, international AIDS conferences have increasingly become a key news-generating event. Coverage of international AIDS conferences accounted for 3% of all HIV/AIDS news stories, and represented an increasing share of coverage over time. News coverage of such conferences accounted for 6% of stories in 1996 and 1998, 8% in 2000, and 11% in 2002 (Table 1). This increase was mainly driven by broadcast coverage related to the conferences; such coverage accounted for 36% of all broadcast coverage of HIV/AIDS in 2002. Perhaps more importantly, total media coverage of HIV/AIDS increased significantly during months in which the conferences occurred (Chart 4). The number of HIV/AIDS news stories in months in which international AIDS conferences took place was on average 48% higher than the average number of stories per month in a given year. World AIDS Day was less of a driver of coverage, with the average number of stories in December each year being roughly equivalent to the average number of stories per month for that year.

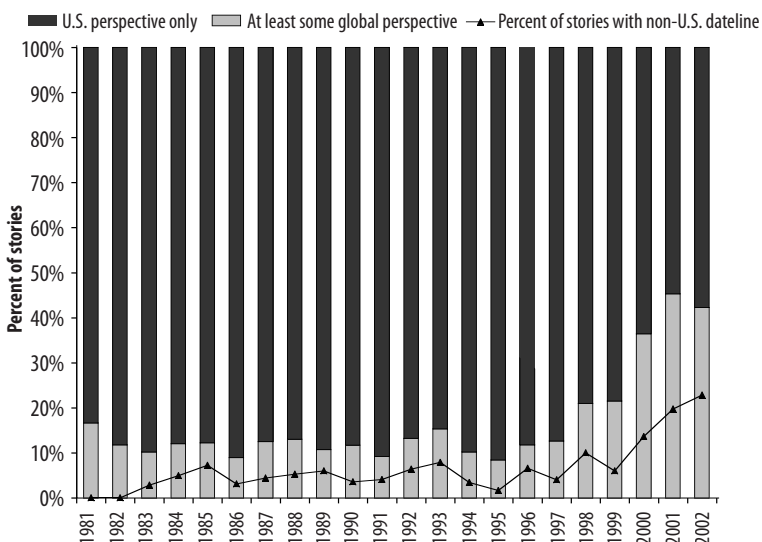
Chart 5. Total number of HIV/AIDS news stories with domestic vs. global focus by year



Domestic Versus International Focus of Coverage

There has been a recent increase in coverage of the global epidemic and a simultaneous decline in domestic coverage. Media coverage of HIV/AIDS was mainly U.S.-focused throughout this 22-year time period, with 94% of all stories having a U.S. dateline, and 86% presenting a U.S.-only perspective. Beginning in the late 1990s, there was a significant increase in coverage presenting a global perspective, with a simultaneous decline in coverage of the domestic story (Chart 5 and Chart 6). Between 1997 and 2002, the number of stories in the selected media outlets presenting at least some global perspective increased 118% from 177 to 386, while the number of stories with a U.S.-only perspective decreased 57% from 1227 to 527. By 2001 and 2002, more than one in five HIV/AIDS news stories had a non-U.S. dateline, and more than 40% presented at least some global perspective.

Chart 6. Percent of stories with U.S. vs. global perspective and percent with non-U.S. dateline by year



The recent increase in global coverage was mainly driven by broadcast news. Throughout the time period, and particularly between 2000 and 2002, broadcast news stories were more likely to present a global perspective than print news. From 1981 through 1999, 17% of broadcast news stories had at least some global perspective, compared with 12% of newspaper stories. During 2000-2002, 62% of broadcast stories had at least some global perspective, compared with 40% of newspaper stories. Broadcast stories during this time period were also somewhat more likely to have a non-U.S. dateline (25% of broadcast versus 18% of print).

In addition to differences between broadcast and print news, there were also differences in U.S. versus global perspectives among the different newspapers sampled. Among newspaper stories, nationally focused papers (19%) were more likely than regionally focused papers (11%) to include a global perspective, particularly during 2000-2002 (49% of coverage in nationally focused papers versus 30% in regionally focused papers presented a global perspective in 2000-2002).

Table 2. Percent of stories by dominant HIV/AIDS topic over time

Dominant Topic	Total	1981-1986	1987-1990	1991-1995	1996-1999	2000-2002
HIV prevention/protection	13%	10%	14%	14%	12%	12%
Education/awareness efforts	7%	4%	7%	7%	6%	6%
Research	11%	13%	11%	9%	14%	10%
Treatment/drugs	5%	5%	5%	3%	7%	4%
Vaccine	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%
Transmission	10%	17%	11%	9%	8%	3%
Social issues	10%	15%	13%	8%	6%	4%
Discrimination/stigma	6%	12%	7%	4%	2%	1%
Government funding/financing	8%	7%	9%	5%	8%	18%
Funding for treatment	2%	2%	3%	1%	1%	2%
Cost of prescription drugs	1%	<1%	1%	<1%	1%	7%
Epidemiology	8%	11%	6%	6%	8%	12%
Philanthropic fundraising efforts	7%	3%	4%	9%	10%	10%
Testing	6%	7%	8%	5%	5%	2%
Political issues	6%	5%	7%	6%	2%	8%
Treatment	5%	3%	6%	5%	7%	6%
Public figures' HIV status/death	5%	3%	3%	9%	4%	3%
Reviews (film, music, etc.)	4%	1%	3%	7%	5%	5%
Volunteer efforts	2%	<1%	1%	3%	4%	3%
Other	4%	3%	4%	5%	6%	5%

In order to provide an indication of the differences between U.S. and European coverage in terms of focus on the global epidemic, we included 610 stories from *The London Times* in a comparison sample for the same time period. Throughout the time period, coverage in *The London Times* was more likely than U.S. print coverage to present a global perspective. Overall, 36% of *London 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 *London Times* 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, U.S. print coverage was more similar to *London Times* coverage in the amount of global perspective presented. In these years, 48% of *London Times* stories presented 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. At the same time, 27% of *London Times* stories had a non-U.K. dateline, compared with 18% of total U.S. print coverage (and 22% of coverage in nationally focused U.S. papers) that had a non-U.S. dateline.

Portrayal of Affected Populations

Portrayal of the HIV/AIDS affected population also shifted towards a global focus. Mirroring the shift in coverage towards the global epidemic, there was a decrease over time in the focus of media coverage on the U.S. population as the affected population. Between 1981 and 1986, 18% of stories focused on the U.S. population as the affected population, compared with 10% between 2000 and 2002. During this same time frame, there was an increase in focus on the world population as the affected population (2% to 6%), as well as non-U.S. populations in general (2% to 7%), and African (1% to 19%) and Asian (<1% to 4%) nations' populations in particular.

Specific populations disproportionately affected by the U.S. epidemic were the focus of only a small amount of coverage. After the very early years of the epidemic, media coverage of HIV/AIDS was never dominated by stories about gay men, who were the focus of 4% of stories overall. While gay men represented 100% of the affected population as portrayed by the news media in 1981, that share quickly declined to 38% in 1982, 22% in 1984, and 5% in 1986, and remained at or below 5% through 2002. Besides gay men, other subgroups disproportionately affected by the epidemic also received relatively little focus, with 3% of stories overall portraying U.S. minorities, 3% portraying teenagers and young adults, and 2% portraying women as the affected population. Similarly, images used in broadcast stories only rarely reflected specific populations affected by HIV/AIDS. In an analysis of the "face of AIDS" as visually portrayed in broadcast news, the most frequently portrayed population was health care professionals (20% of broadcast stories). Gay men were the on-camera focus of 3% of stories, teenagers and young adults were portrayed in 3%, minorities in 1%, and women in 1%.

Story Topics

The dominant topic of HIV/AIDS news stories changed somewhat over time. Overall, stories were widely distributed among different HIV/AIDS topics (Table 2). The most prominent category was HIV prevention, which accounted for 13% of stories overall. This category was mainly made up of stories about HIV education and awareness efforts (7%). This was followed by 11% of stories that were about research, including research on HIV drugs and treatments (5%), and vaccines (2%). One in ten stories overall were about HIV transmission, and another one in ten were about social issues such as discrimination and housing for people with HIV/AIDS.

Over time, there were declines in stories about HIV transmission (17% in 1981-1986 to 3% in 2000-2002), social issues such as discrimination and housing (15% to 4%), and HIV testing (7% to 2%). At the same time, there was a large increase in stories about government funding/financing for HIV/AIDS (7% to 18%), including the cost of prescription drugs (<1% to 7%); and those about philanthropic fundraising efforts (3% to 10%) (Table 2).

Global coverage and the prescription drug story. Much of the change in story topics in the 2000-2002 time period was driven by the emerging story of HIV/AIDS in Africa, the global epidemic more generally, and debates over prescription drug prices and access. Stories during this time period that presented a global perspective were more likely than U.S.-focused stories to be about government funding/financing efforts (31% of global stories vs. 10% of U.S. stories), the cost of prescription drugs (16% vs. 1%), and political issues (11% vs. 5%). However, the increase in stories about philanthropic fundraising efforts was mainly driven by the domestic story; 15% of stories presenting a U.S.-only perspective were about this topic, compared with 3% of global-perspective stories.

Broadcast news was more likely than print news to focus on research. Broadcast news included a higher proportion of stories about HIV/AIDS research and epidemiology/surveillance reports than print news, particularly during the later years of the study. Overall, 18% of broadcast stories were about research (compared with 11% of print stories), and 11% of broadcast stories were about epidemiology/surveillance reports (compared with 7% of print stories). The difference in epidemiology reports was even larger in 2000-2002, when such reports accounted for 25% of broadcast news compared with 11% of print news. Print news was more likely than broadcast news to include stories about philanthropic fundraising efforts, which accounted for 7% of print stories overall, but only 1% of broadcast stories.

Tone of Media Coverage

1996-1999 was the most optimistic period of HIV/AIDS news coverage. Overall, 27% of all media coverage of HIV/AIDS was optimistic, 23% was pessimistic, and the remaining half was neutral in tone. The period with the

most optimistic coverage was 1996-1999, during the advent of highly active antiretroviral therapy (33% optimistic, 18% pessimistic, 49% neutral). In 2000-2002, when coverage began to shift towards the global epidemic, optimism fell back to pre-1996 levels (27% optimistic, 25% pessimistic, 48% neutral).

Broadcast news was most dramatic and most pessimistic, especially in 2000-2002. Throughout the time period, broadcast news included more anecdotal drama than print news (48% of broadcast stories versus 32% of print stories contained at least some drama). Broadcast stories were more likely to be pessimistic and less likely to be optimistic than print stories overall, and the optimism/pessimism balance of broadcast news was more volatile and time-dependent than print news (Chart 7). For instance, 1996-1999, the period when highly active antiretroviral therapy came into widespread use in the U.S., was the only period during which broadcast coverage included more optimistic stories (38%) than pessimistic stories (31%). However, by 2000-2002, when broadcast coverage focused more on the global epidemic, the optimism/pessimism balance shifted dramatically to 47% pessimistic versus 17% optimistic.

Length and Placement of Coverage

Newspaper stories became longer over time. On average, newspaper stories were 567 words long, and broadcast stories lasted 100 seconds. The length of newspaper stories increased over time, from an average 536 words in 1981-1986, to an average 653 words in 2000-2002. Broadcast stories were 93 seconds long on average in 1981-1986, increased to an average 111 seconds in 1996-1999, and decreased again to 95 seconds in 2000-2002.

Newspaper stories appeared increasingly in the business section. Overall, 30% of newspaper stories appeared in national/international sections, 29% appeared in metro/local/regional sections, 10% appeared in style/life sections, 7% appeared in business sections, and another 7% appeared on page one. Over time, HIV/AIDS stories were increasingly found in the business section (4% in 1981-1986 to 11% in 2000-2002), and less often in the national/international (41% to 32%) and metro/local/regional sections (32% to 20%). The proportion of stories in the style/life and sports sections peaked in 1991-1995, and has since declined, while the proportion of stories on page one has remained fairly steady at around 7% throughout the 22-year time period (Chart 8).

Overall among broadcast stories, 29% appeared in the upper third of the broadcast, half appeared in the middle third, and 22% appeared in the bottom third. Over time, stories were less likely to appear at the beginning of the broadcast (32% of stories in 1981-1986 appeared in the upper third, compared with 19% in 2000-2002) and more likely to appear at the end (16% of stories in 1981-1986 appeared in the bottom third, compared with 28% in 2000-2002).

Consumer Education Component

Over time, fewer stories contained information related to consumer education. Early on in the epidemic, little was known about how HIV was transmitted, how it could be prevented, and how it could progress to AIDS. Even as recently as 2000, surveys found that four in ten Americans thought that HIV could be transmitted through kissing, one in five thought it could be transmitted through sharing a drinking glass, and one in six thought it

Chart 7. Percent of optimistic/pessimistic stories by period and media type

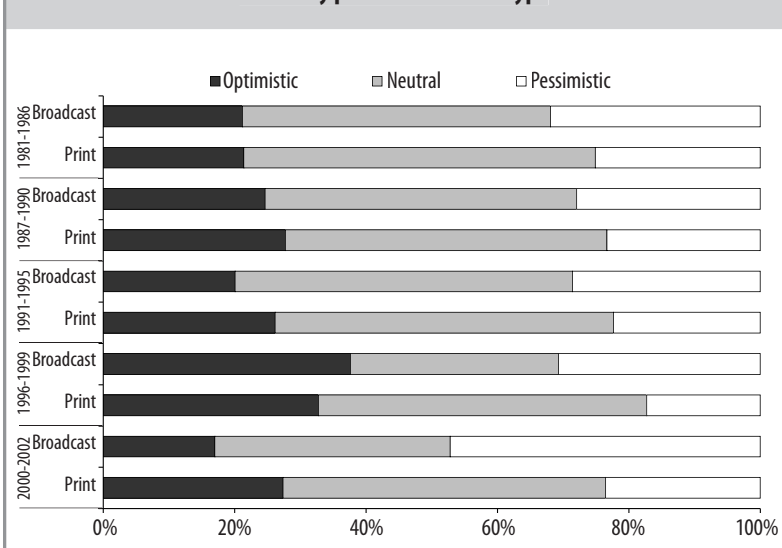
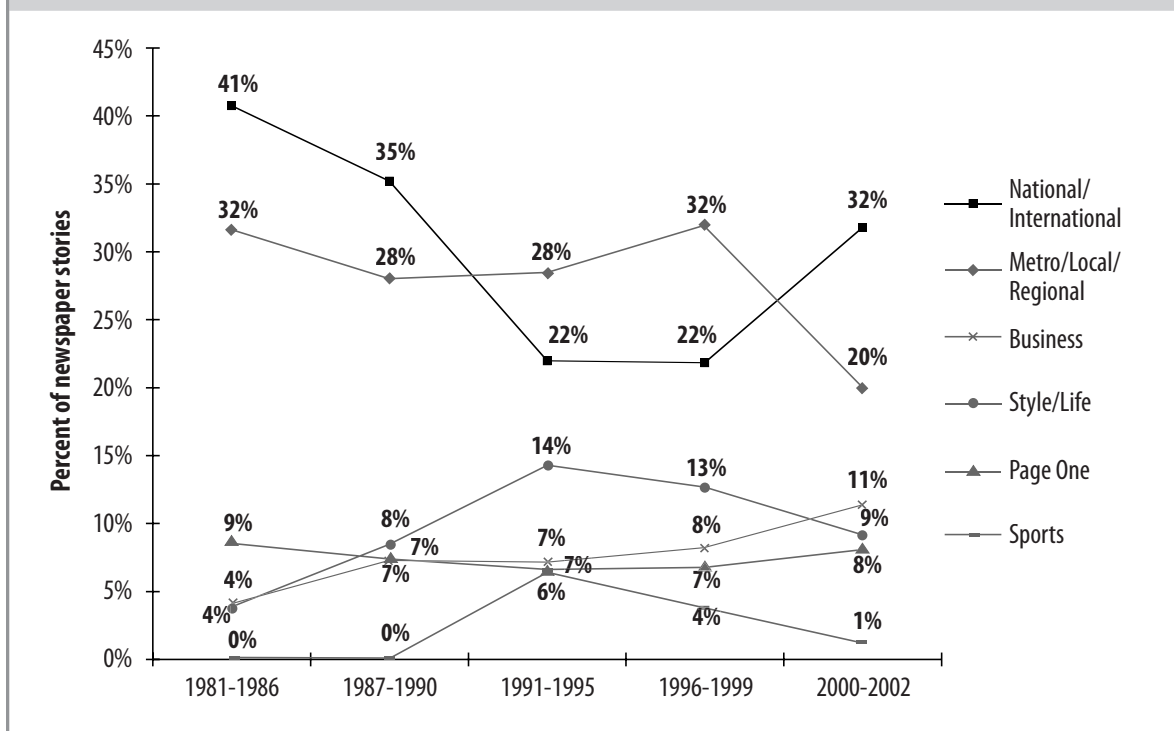


Chart 8. Distribution of HIV/AIDS stories by newspaper section over time



was possible to be infected by touching a toilet seat³. Looking at coverage over the entire time period, 36% of stories included at least some consumer information/education component, though most of these (27% of all stories) included information/education just as a passing reference. Of those stories that had at least some educational component, 18% were about HIV prevention and protection, 13% were about research, another 13% were about transmission, 10% were about social issues such as discrimination and stigma, and the remainder were about a variety of other topics.

Over time, the percentage of stories containing at least some consumer education declined. The period with the highest proportion of stories containing consumer education was 1981-1986, when 48% of stories contained an educational component. This proportion fell to 37% in 1987-1990, and has since declined steadily to 30% in 2000-2002.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the main questions raised about media coverage of HIV/AIDS in recent years is whether there has been media “fatigue” in covering the story. Based on this study, some might argue that such fatigue did in fact occur, as evidenced not only by a decline in the total number of stories over time, but also by the decreased reporting on the domestic epidemic. This decline coincided with a change in the nature of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S. from an absolute death sentence to a chronic disease that more people live with and manage day to day. Others might argue that this does not amount to AIDS fatigue, and in fact it is the usual and customary news practice to focus on other things when an epidemic switches to a global focus, when there are no major new developments in terms of vaccines and treatment, and when the epidemic affects a small and increasingly marginalized population in the U.S. The

challenge for journalists covering HIV/AIDS is to find new ways to keep their audience engaged in a story that may not meet editorial standards for “news” as clearly as it once did.

Perhaps a more important trend is the decrease in the number of stories with a consumer education component in recent years. This finding is particularly disturbing when considering the lack of knowledge about HIV transmission cited above, and also when compared with the fact that the number of new AIDS cases diagnosed in the U.S. increased 2.2 percent in 2002 according to the CDC, the first increase since 1993, and new HIV infections in the U.S. remain at 40,000 annually. In addition, while the majority of new HIV infections in the U.S. occur in people under the age of 25, only 1% of stories in the 2000-2002 time period focused on teenagers and young adults. Though AIDS is now the leading cause of death among African Americans ages 25 to 44, and they represent the majority of new HIV infections, only 2% of stories during this time period focused on African Americans. These findings raise the ever-present question of the appropriate role of journalists, especially in the context of a public health epidemic: to what extent do the media have a responsibility to educate the public, as opposed to focusing only on reporting the news?

For those who would worry about AIDS fatigue, some encouragement can be found; the data suggest that the news organizations have responded to significant changes in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly since 2000. New stories have emerged, including AIDS in Africa and worldwide efforts to fight the global epidemic, as well as the emergence of HIV/AIDS as a business story and a political story. The focus on the global epidemic is particularly important, given its enormity and growing impact in many parts of the world. This could signal a “rebirth” of the story, with a different focus. However, keeping some focus on the domestic epidemic while telling these and other new stories will remain a challenge for journalists competing for limited news space.

³ Kaiser Family Foundation National Survey of Americans on HIV/AIDS, conducted August 14–October 26, 2000.

METHODOLOGY

Media sources were selected to present a meaningful assessment of content presented by news outlets widely available to the public. Selections were made on both a geographic and a demographic basis, as well as diversity of ownership.

Print sources

Sources chosen: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* were selected to represent publications most likely to be circulated among policy makers and the public on a nationwide basis. The *Los Angeles Times*, *The Miami Herald*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* were selected to provide an examination of how coverage might or might not have differed between and among distinct metropolitan areas that were particularly hard-hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. *The London Times* was selected to provide a contrast between U.S. news media and a non-U.S. publication. (Note: unless otherwise noted, all findings included here are based on U.S. media sources only.)

Quantification and Sampling: Assessment began by quantifying the articles that appeared in each publication from January 1, 1981 through December 31, 2002. The LEXIS-NEXIS database was used to quantify coverage for all publications except *The Wall Street Journal*, for which the Dow Jones DataBase was utilized, and *The Miami Herald*, which was accessed via the DIALOG database. Search language was designed to cast the widest net possible in order to capture pertinent stories (search terms included not only “AIDS” and “HIV”, but also terms such as “Kaposi’s sarcoma,” and combinations of “gay” or “homosexual” with “cancer,” “sarcoma,” “virus,” etc. in order to capture stories published before the terms HIV and AIDS were widely used).

The New York Times, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* were accessible via electronic database searches for the complete timeframe. The *San Francisco Chronicle* is also included for the entire 1981-2002 study period, via a combination of NEXIS searches and the paper’s in-house archives. Other papers were phased-in based on availability as follows: *Miami Herald* (1983); *The London Times* (1985); *Los Angeles Times* (1985); *USA Today* (1989).

In order to reach the project target that 90% of all cases be drawn from print sources, a stratified sampling plan was implemented. Because the amount of coverage was limited during earliest part of the study’s timeframe, and the number of searchable newspapers was limited, all stories available during that period (1981-1984) were selected for full coding. During peak years of coverage (1985-2000), sample was constructed by selecting every 7th story within each newspaper. For the remaining years (2001-2002), story selection was returned to total-universe levels, and all stories for all newspapers were selected.

Screening and Inclusion: Newspaper stories were first screened for inclusion. False drops, letters to the editor, news digests, etc. were removed from the sample⁴. Each case was then examined to determine whether or not HIV/AIDS topics and issues were prominently featured within the story. When necessary, coders used the following rule to make those decisions: If 50% or more of the article was direct reporting on HIV/AIDS topics, that story was included/fully

coded; or if 33% of the article plus the headline (not the sub headline) was direct reporting on HIV/AIDS topic, that story was included/fully coded. The resulting newspaper sample totaled 8,783 stories.

Broadcast sources

Quantification and Sampling: Broadcast news stories from ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News were acquired from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives. To review all stories that appeared January 1, 1981 - December 31, 2002, the Vanderbilt Archives were searched for all stories where the index monograph included the terms “HIV” or “AIDS”. Supplemental searches were applied to the 1981-1984 database, utilizing the following additional search terms: “gay and cancer”, “gay and virus”, “homosexual and cancer”, “homosexual and virus”, “Kaposi”, “pneumocystis”, “cytomegalovirus” or “lymphadenopathy”. This resulted in a total universe of 2,522 stories. Because network news programs produce a relatively small number of stories as compared to their newspaper counterparts, a higher percentage of stories were selected for the sample. With an established target of 10% of the project’s total sample to be drawn from broadcast sources, all stories available during the earliest part of the study’s timeframe (1981-1984), were selected. To construct the sample for the remaining years (1985-2002), every 3rd story was selected.

Screening and Inclusion: After viewing by senior staff, false hits were eliminated using the established inclusion rule. The resulting network news sample totaled 882 stories.

Weighting and Data Analysis

Prior to data analysis, cases representing the 1985-2000 sample were weighted in order to bring those years up to full value in the dataset. The analysis cited in this report is based on the weighted dataset.

Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability measures the extent to which coders, operating autonomously, code or classify the same story in the same way. Intercoder reliability tests were performed throughout this study, with senior staff acting as the control coder; no significant differences were found to exist on a recurring basis. Selected stories were double-coded in their entirety, and overall intercoder reliability exceeded 85% for all variables.

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Additional copies of this publication (#7023) as well as topline results (#7025) and a full methodology report (#7026) are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation’s website at www.kff.org.

⁴Obituaries were excluded from the sample if AIDS was simply included as the cause of death, but were included if part of a larger news event (i.e. the death of a prominent HIV/AIDS activist). Unfortunately, this limits the ability of this analysis to comment on whether it became more acceptable over time to list AIDS as the cause of death in obituaries.