

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Background: written sources and their symbolic messages

This research reflects my interest in studies pertaining to the sociology of health and illness as well as the print media. My study bears on the complex relationships between science and journalism. It crystallizes around the symbolic construction of AIDS as narrative, a narrative constructed through primary sources, namely newspaper reports (see below). Henceforth, the methodological practices embedded in this study can be located within an understanding of a research technique commonly known as content analysis. Stone¹ defines content analysis as a research method that makes inferences by “systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics within a text”. Content analysis embodies a comprehensive inquiry into what Krippendorff² would call “the symbolic meaning of messages”.

Mouton’s take on content analysis is also instructive. Content analysis, he states, is a “methodology for transforming various kinds of documents, speeches, presentations, video and film material and other recorded phenomena into a form that social scientists can analyse by means of statistical tests”.³ Note that there are ‘qualitative traditions’ in content analysis too. Mouton underlines this reading when he states that

¹ P J Stone 1966, *The general inquirer: a computer approach to content analysis* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 5.

² K Krippendorff 1980, *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage), 22.

³ J Mouton 1987, ‘The philosophy of qualitative research’, in T Ferreira, *Introduction to qualitative research methods* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council), 26.

“content analysis is a method for the analysis of qualitative data”. This study gravitates towards the more *qualitative* versions of content analysis.

3.2 Written sources and their advantages

Krippendorff hits the point when he states that most social processes are transacted through symbols. This, he adds, reveals the reason that the widest use of written sources is found in the social sciences.⁴ Just the same, by no means does this imply that other research methodologies, notably interviews and questionnaires, are much less useful. These research methods afford us an opportunity to analyse the subject at the level of consciousness. By my account, however, their reactive or obtrusive manner is their major sign of weakness. Interviews are good examples. In interviews, the awareness of being observed and researched, the stereotypes and preferences of the researcher or respondent, and the subject’s assumed or assigned role as interviewee or respondent might sometimes compromise or jeopardise the credibility and validity of the research process itself.⁵ By sharp contrast, written sources hardly permit undue constraints on the research situation.

The other strength offered by written sources is that they reveal the mentalities and values rooted in the time in which they were written (they reveal the so-called period atmosphere). In addition, written sources provide a sound basis for historical interpretation. Like primary sources,⁶ they are very useful as a means of situating social phenomena historically. What is more, written sources are much less constrained by empirical measurements. In addition, they are the most precise as

⁴ Krippendorff, *Content analysis*, 29.

⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion on the uses of primary sources, see J Tosh 1991, *The pursuit of history: aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* (New York: Longman), 33–34.

regards time, place and authorship (again see John Tosh⁷ for further discussion regarding the application of written material for research). In this study, I cast my historical sources (newspaper reports) in the role of primary sources. I treat them as raw material, since they illuminate the *primordial* story of AIDS in the media. They reveal to us a wide range of views and sets of meanings that were embedded in the language of AIDS in the past.

3.3 Steps in the research process

(a) *Formulating the research problem*

In terms of the general principle underlying this research, my approach is based on what Tosh would call a source-oriented approach.⁸ To determine the nature of the research study, a few written sources (primary and secondary sources) were gathered and assiduously read. Out of this was born the following hypothesis which I thought is amenable to sociological investigation: *A specific combination of narrative forms that were embedded in the South African print media from the early 1980s to the late 1990s gave rise to particular knowledges, meanings or understandings as regards Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.*

Importantly, media representations of AIDS in accordance with these narrative conventions (the reader should know by now that by ‘narrative conventions’ the author has in mind the “received narrative”, the “narrative of moral protest”, “gay disease”, “heterosexual African AIDS”, “modern-day Black Death” and “redemption”) bequeathed a range of implications or consequences. To begin, the

⁷ Ibid, 31.

⁸ Ibid, 31.

framing of AIDS within the boundaries of the narrative of moral protest, heterosexual African AIDS, modern-day Black Death and redemption, justified seeing the disease as a public health emergency. Here the media's moral outrage or the media's evocation of moral protest, their mainstreaming of 'safe sex' as a critical public health measure, their privileging of the metaphor of an African heterosexual plague, and their 'agreement' to honour their moral commitment to the victims of AIDS (redemption), came to represent a central aspect of the self-definition of the AIDS story.

Second, the embeddedness of narrative forms in the AIDS story justified the disqualification, evacuation or effacing of theory – – or that which, according to Paula Treichler, is *reportedly* devoid of relevance for “practice” and “real-life experience”.⁹ For example, the depiction of AIDS as a heterosexual disease and a modern-day Black Death justified seeing the fight against AIDS as a 'war', a great battle against a contemporary apocalypse. In this context, thoughtful reflection, theory, or 'engaged dialectic' was substituted for practice or pragmatism. In fact, in the age of AIDS, dialogue or engaged dialectic were thought to be crippling the war against the disease. AIDS, one newspaper reported, “is not a freedom of speech issue”.¹⁰ In the age of AIDS, reflectiveness, explanation, or analysis sounded ridiculous! Theory connoted a 'cheating game', so to speak, a holding off or a retarding tactic.

What is more, media representations of AIDS in accordance with certain customs, mores, clichés or habits (narrative conventions) provided the very terms in which the disease came to be understood as a major social problem invested with an objective status. In great measure, these anomic depictions of the disease also shaped the

⁹ Treichler, 'AIDS, gender, and biomedical discourse', 2.

¹⁰ *Sunday Times*, 7 May 2000.

theoretical orientations of this study. The metaphoric representations of AIDS as both a war and a plague (a plague reportedly snuffing out the lives of millions of heterosexuals in Africa) justified not only seeing AIDS as a social disorder which must be treated as a matter of urgency, but also the need for surveillance. That AIDS embodied a social problem was sufficient to confirm that ‘things fall apart’, that ‘the centre cannot hold’, that ‘anarchy is loosed upon the world’, and that ‘the ceremony of innocence is drowned’. Here the disease was understood in structural functionalist terms: according to the media’s logic, the absence of ‘moral reality’ or the ‘collective conscience’ was the reason that the centre cannot hold. Thus, moral discipline or surveillance was singled out as a condition for social integration.

From the mid-1990s AIDS was not only understood in terms of the conventional patterns of traditional sociology, but was also situated historically. As will be seen in Chapter 9, when *moral protest* against the ‘foibles of the sinful’ (the victims of AIDS) was displaced by what I call *moral commitment*, the AIDS story moved from a liberal-subjectivist perspective, whereby the AIDS victim was caricatured as a free-thinking and autonomous being (here the reader is reminded of the major tenets of the human agency approach or phenomenology), towards a historical perspective, whereby the attempt to explain the disease in terms of some historical injury was qualified (the individual victim was conceived of as a product of the larger historical issues acting upon him – or her). The AIDS story embodied redemption; it embodied moral sympathy for the victims of the disease.

A preliminary study of the contents of a few written sources (here the reader is reminded of the source-based approach mentioned previously) assisted a great deal not only in distinguishing – in advance – between relevant and irrelevant sources and

in formulating the actual research hypothesis, but also in choosing the relevant research method itself. In other words, the general principle of my study shaped its orientation towards a qualitative form of content analysis. Qualitative methodologies got me focused a great deal on what Mouton designates the “qualities of human behaviour”.¹¹ Mouton’s qualities of human behaviour allow the researcher to move beyond the more positivistic methods of social research where,

- all phenomena are tangible, observable, and measurable, and;
- all subjective actions such as mind, feelings and motives are meaningful for the scientist as long as they are conceptualised in terms of overt characteristics.¹²

Another necessary disclosure for the present is that my study gravitated towards the more qualitative versions of content analysis by virtue of its analytical orientation: its symbolic construction of AIDS. That social processes are transacted through a specific set of meanings or symbols (see above) justified my application of qualitative methodologies. As indicated earlier, this study infers specific narrative forms from written sources.

(b) Units of analysis

The phenomenon of interest in this study, you will remember, is *AIDS in the media*. Accordingly, the units of analysis are the sources from which this contemporary social form was widely documented: newspaper reports. Hence the systematic application of documentary material for research designates the primary domain of my thesis. As mentioned, these documentary records constitute raw material or primary sources.

¹¹ Mouton, ‘The philosophy of qualitative research’, 1.

¹² Lundberg, cited in Mouton, ‘The philosophy of qualitative research’, 3.

They were written by working journalists in the past and then exploited for their newsworthiness. As any zealous or impassioned reader of current South African newspapers would attest, contemporary journalists have been influenced a great deal by what their predecessors had narrativized in the past. Therefore, our written sources were not only written for posterity, they were also written for contemporaries. They provide the concepts, meanings and definitions in terms of which contemporary AIDS is understood, framed and commodified as a biomedical disease, a heterosexual disease, a modern-day Black Death, a human interest story or a galvanizing cultural experience.

My study focuses entirely on the print media in South Africa. Primarily, the reason for this relates to the frequency of AIDS in newspaper reports. It hardly needs saying that since the early 1980s the phenomenon of AIDS has enjoyed more extensive coverage in the print media than in any other medium – such as television and radio. Included in this study are the news contents of *The Star*, *The Weekly Mail*, *Mail & Guardian*, *The Sunday Star* (now defunct), *The Sunday Tribune*, *The Citizen*, *The Argus*, *Sunday Times*, *Sowetan*, *The Daily News*, *City Press* and *The Sunday Independent*. These editions were chosen on the basis of their largest circulation as well as their extensive coverage of a wide spectrum of themes pertaining to my subject of interest. Analysis of the newspaper reports begins from 1983, when AIDS was first reported in the South African media – see tables 1 and 2 below. (You will recall that the disease itself was first discovered in 1981 by the Centres for Disease Control in Los Angeles, USA.) The study ends at the turn of the 21st century, 2000. Hence my research retains one of the most important hallmarks of sociological scholarship, namely a historical perspective. This study is faithful to historical chronology; for one thing, it proceeds

from the premise that current popular conceptions of AIDS in the media have their origins in the remotest past.

(c) Sampling

In the process of doing this research, I discovered almost 4 000 media reports on AIDS (1983–2000). Faced with such a high volume of data, I used a random sampling method – to select a sample that is representative enough for analysis. Against this backdrop can be understood two sequential steps that also permeated judgements in this study. First, all of the relevant units (*The Star, The Weekly Mail, Mail & Guardian, The Saturday Star, The Sunday Star, Sunday Times, The Sunday Tribune, The Citizen, The Pretoria News, Sowetan, The Argus, The Daily News, City Press, and The Sunday Independent*) were identified and then listed. Second, about 2 200 newspaper reports were selected from which to make certain generalizations. Inferences as regards the narrative forms underlying the AIDS story in the media were made from the contents of editorials, feature stories, front-page leads and the so-called general news.

(d) Thematic analysis

For each newspaper, inferences regarding AIDS in the media were made by looking for news reports connected with the following ‘characterizations’:

- AIDS victims – homosexuals and heterosexuals
- AIDS as a clinical syndrome, that is, a contagious or infectious disease
- AIDS as an embodiment of sin, a function of sexual promiscuity

- AIDS as a plague, a modern-day Black Death
- AIDS as a ‘quiet revolution’ – and representations of HIV as a ‘slow’ virus (lentivirus)
- AIDS and civil liberties or human rights
- AIDS and “AIDS orphans” or “AIDS babies,” and
- AIDS and social responsibility – community-based health care

I argue in this thesis that media representations of the victims of AIDS (homosexuals and heterosexuals) revealed their sense of stereotyping. By depicting AIDS as a “homosexual disease” or “heterosexual disease”, the media accepted as an established fact the critical linkage between identity and disease. This prototype of sociological assertion – the idea that there is a connective tissue linking disease to identity, or that being a particular type of person, a homosexual or African heterosexual, was a major risk factor for AIDS – was undoubtedly the most classic example of media stereotyping; it was based on simplification and generalization. And media reports that depicted AIDS as a clinical syndrome caused by a virus reflected the journalists’ interest in questions of etiology or the science of the disease. By fastening upon the biological underpinnings of the disease, the media echoed its germ theory, its biomedical or received narrative.

On the other hand, media reports linking AIDS to sin or promiscuous sexual behaviour collected around the narrative of moral protest. Here moralizing about AIDS became quite widespread. Not only was AIDS represented as God’s punishment for our sins (or ‘divine judgement’), but also as a function of the moral flaws of our society. Immorality and promiscuity, so the argument ran, provided the perfect staging ground for AIDS. And the idea that AIDS is a disease rising in a compounded manner

resonated profoundly with the idea that the disease is a classic example of a ‘plague’. That AIDS was on an exponential rise justified seeing it as a modern-day Black Death. As will be seen, this exponential increase was depicted by way of harrowing statistics and figures.

And media representations of HIV as a slow virus not only reflected the journalists’ interest in questions of etiology (science), they also manifested the theme of redemption in these reports. Because HIV was caricatured as a slow virus launching a ‘quiet revolution’ (note that the virus was thought to have a latent period of up to 20 years!), the idea of a ‘caring society’ acquired special relevance; it became one of the watermarks of the story of AIDS. Empathy, care, love and compassion for those infected by HIV permeated many news reports. No longer was AIDS represented as a ‘divine judgement’, a ‘visitation’, or a ‘curse’. At this point, the central themes of social responsibility, reciprocal relationships and social partnerships against AIDS began to loom large. Added to this was the call for non-discrimination and respect for the civil liberties of those living with the ‘AIDS virus’. In my qualitative content analysis I investigated the frequency with which these characterizations were referred to in the media. These characterizations made up the principal components of my research, the recurrent themes of the AIDS story in the media.

(e) *Identifying patterns and trends*

Krippendorff identifies a number of prototypes in content analysis. Notable among these are the predictive use of patterns and the extrapolation of trends.¹³ The first identifies the “principal constituent elements within a genre” that have a high degree

¹³ Krippendorff, *Content analysis*, 36.

of predictability; the other prototype observes changes in the “principal constituent elements” over time.¹⁴ My study also aimed to identify a number of constituent elements (for example AIDS as a heterosexual and gay disease, AIDS as sin, and AIDS as a quiet revolution) within a literary genre, namely newspaper reports. In this study, I refer to these constituent elements within a genre narrative themes (see above). I argue that these narrative themes also made up the main ingredients of the story of AIDS in the media. Furthermore, my study identified specific trends in the media reports so to observe *changes over time*. It identified breaks, ruptures and continuities in the development of specific knowledges as regards AIDS from the beginning of the 1980s. As we have seen in the previous Chapter, this methodological practice fits into the frame of what I have elected to call ‘genealogy’.

Table 1 *A sample of 302 news reports which indicate the critical linkage between group identity and risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS over time*

Period atmosphere	Theme	Number	%
1981–1987	Homosexuals	62	21
1987–1990	Heterosexual Africans	88	29
1990–1995	Heterosexual Africans	80	26
1995–2000	Heterosexual Africans	72	24
TOTAL	_____	302	100

Table 1 above shows a striking shift over a period of almost 20 years (1983–2000) in terms of levels of risk of exposure to AIDS. As I have mentioned, perhaps to the

¹⁴ Ibid, 36.

point of redundancy, knowledge derived from written records can only be understood in relation to the social context within which these records were written. Their symbolic meaning heightens our historical consciousness – it provides important insights into a range of events that have their origins in the historical past. This is what Krippendorf¹⁵ calls the “vicarious nature of symbolic communication” – the idea that written sources provide grounding for the understanding of phenomena “other than those directly observed”.¹⁶ This too underlines my reading that sociological knowledge can only be understood within highly specific historical contexts. Sociological knowledge is imbued with a contingent status. In sociology, this approach parallels a practice of interpretation commonly known as historicism.¹⁷ As you will remember, for the historicist, understanding historical variabilities over time and space is the key to grasping sociological concepts and theories. In terms of AIDS, historicists would not only be interested in a range of concepts and meanings that accompany our learning about the disease; their contingent status would also be of profounder concern to them.

My primary sources can also be located within an understanding of their ‘period atmosphere’. They reveal AIDS as a historical phenomenon; they locate the story of AIDS historically (see also Chapters 1, 2 and 10). As table 1 indicates, from the early 1980s to the mid-1980s knowledge of AIDS manifested certain unique qualities or attributes. Media reports rooted in the climate of the time revealed a particular configuration of thoughts and mentalities. As you can see, homosexuality alone was considered the main circumstance around people contracting AIDS. Accordingly, the generation of news was undertaken with a particular ‘risk group’ in mind, namely

¹⁵ Ibid, 23–34.

¹⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹⁷ See for example Tosh *The pursuit of history*, 12–14.

homosexual men. Homosexuals constituted what Benedict¹⁸ would call a “common frame of reference” – between the journalist and the reader. Hence AIDS in this period must be understood in its own terms and not compared across historical epochs. This viewed differently, until the mid-1980s AIDS in the media must be seen ‘from the inside’ and not compared with later periods, since it manifested certain distinctive qualities. The period from the mid-1980s to 2000 embodies a departure from the thoughts and mentalities of the earlier generation of working journalists. For one thing, from the mid-1980s AIDS in the media was caricatured as an ‘egalitarian disease,’ a heterosexual disease contaminating both men and women. There was rupture (or change) in the AIDS story; certain breaks or fissures can be seen in the media’s news reports on AIDS.

From this point of view, the AIDS story moved in a predictable sequence from a gay disease to a heterosexual disease. Hence, in terms of media representations of the victims of AIDS, the two historical epochs (the period between the early 1980s and the mid-1980s, and the period between the mid-1980s and 2000) cannot be meaningfully compared. That said, there are common manifestations among the sources produced by the media from the mid-1980s to 2000 and our ‘contemporary sources’, that is, those sources produced by the media beyond 2000. Our contemporary sources have been influenced a great deal by journalistic practices that ‘kept going’ over time, by journalistic practices that depicted AIDS as a heterosexual disease. (As any reader of current news reports can attest, AIDS is depicted by working journalists as mainly a heterosexual disease.) That current representations of AIDS are profoundly expressive of the news reports that figured in the media from the mid-1980s and 2000 should afford us an opportunity to see the sense of social

¹⁸ H Benedict 1992, *Virgin or vamp - how the press covers sex crimes* (New York: Oxford University Press), 7.

reproduction (historical continuity) in the AIDS story (see below). Historical continuities in the social practices of the media are important for a number of reasons. First, their presence means that our principal sources (the sources that have been used for the purposes of this study) can be read and understood by both posterity (by ‘posterity’ the author has in mind those readers to whom AIDS entered into their everyday language *in the past* as a heterosexual disease) and contemporaries (by ‘contemporaries’ the author has in mind those readers to whom AIDS is currently entering into their everyday language as a heterosexual disease). Second, the fact that the narrative of heterosexual disease sustained journalistic practices over a much longer period justifies seeing both sources of ‘posterity’ and ‘contemporarity’ as sources wrenched free of major contradictions or inconsistencies.

Third, common manifestations in the sources of posterity and contemporarity should assist us a great deal in enhancing the reliability and credibility of the former. (The reader will recall that subjective colourations - the thoughts and mentalities of the author - can sometimes compromise the reliability and credibility (see below) of documentary sources.) We do not have to be concerned a great deal about some of the common assumptions and value judgements that figured in the media in the past, since these are replicated in many media reports today. Contemporary journalists, the reader should know, also participate in the social reproduction of the story of heterosexual disease. By this rendering, the processes that sustained media depictions of AIDS in the past as a heterosexual disease have ‘kept going’ into the present. Last of all, social reproduction or historical continuities in the AIDS story mean that our sources of posterity (principal sources) and our contemporary sources are not by any means culture-bound. Because current conceptions of AIDS are rooted in the past, any researcher looking at contemporary media reports on AIDS will find it easier to make

some general impressions about the disease itself, about the heterosexual disease that is AIDS.

From this perspective, the main strength of our principal sources can be summarized under the following: not only are these sources vital for grasping the mentalities and values of the primordial past, but they also afford us an opportunity to understand the mentalities and values embedded in our contemporary society. The sense of transformation or change in the social practices followed by the media (the movement of the AIDS story from homosexual disease to heterosexual disease), on the other hand, underlines the reading that there was by no means a smooth path of knowledge development in terms of AIDS; on the contrary, there had been many ruptures, fissures or breaks. Undoubtedly, media accounts of AIDS changed over time in response to changing values and norms.

Tables 1 and 2 are equally expressive of these shifting movements over time in terms of media representations of AIDS. As you can see in table 1 above, between 1983 and 1987 the dominant pattern that emerged was the critical linkage between ‘risk’ behaviour and homosexuality. AIDS was understood in relation to a specific combination of stereotypical beliefs and attitudes regarding homosexual men – distinguishable by a range of sensational markers, namely anal intercourse and the use of intravenous drugs. Out of a total number of 2 200 newspaper reports examined, 62 (3 per cent) posited the connective tissue linking the disease to homosexual ‘lifestyle’ (see table 2 below). Interestingly, from 1987 onwards one notices a remarkable decline in the number of media reports linking AIDS to concurrent infections and immune deficiencies among homosexual men (also see chapter 5). From 1987 to 2000, media interest in the relationship between AIDS, racial identity and

heterosexuality exploded. This critical linkage between libido (sex), skin colour, and heterosexual AIDS found expression in 239 newspaper reports (11 per cent).

Table 2 *Patterns of representation in reference to AIDS in 1908 media reports (1981 to 2000).*

Period	Risk group	Plague	Known etiology	Patho-Genesis	Revisionism	Moral protest	Lentivirus	Redemption	TOTAL	%
1981	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1982	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1983	15	0	3	0	0	9	0	0	27	1
1984	14	0	8	0	0	3	0	0	25	1
1985	21	0	3	0	0	16	0	0	40	2
1986	12	19	6	0	0	8	0	0	45	2
1987	22	16	14	5	0	21	0	0	78	4
1988	29	21	17	0	0	43	0	0	110	6
1989	37	15	12	0	0	27	0	0	91	5
1990	18	19	25	0	9	24	0	0	95	7
1991	25	25	28	6	4	31	0	0	119	6
1992	22	16	48	0	6	26	0	0	118	6
1993	10	18	59	0	5	27	17	16	152	8
1994	5	24	61	0	2	25	14	33	164	9
1995	9	17	47	4	0	18	31	36	162	9
1996	15	10	55	0	0	4	19	47	150	8
1997	13	13	39	0	0	0	23	41	129	7
1998	12	14	48	0	0	0	15	46	135	7
1999	12	7	55	0	0	0	18	55	147	8
2000	11	6	59	0	0	0	8	35	119	6
TOTAL	302	240	587	15	29	282	145	309	1908	100

The power of the media to label, to create AIDS, through certain attributions such as racial stereotyping, coincided with the rising number of news reports centring on the etiology of the disease (as stated above, news reports that covered the etiology of AIDS reflected the media's interest in the science or biomedical determinants of the disease). Whereas in the early 1980s AIDS was linked to "depressed cellular immunity", the "depressed cellular immunity" that engendered Kaposi's sarcoma, pneumocystis carinii, constant fever, swollen glands, and "infected eyes and ears" among homosexual men (see chapter 5), from 1986 onwards AIDS in the South African media was associated with a virus, HIV. Accordingly, from 1986 to 2000 media reports positing a correlational relationship between HIV and AIDS soared. Between 1986 and 1989, 49 reports (2,2 per cent) revealed this journalistic interest in the etiology of the disease. And between 1990 and 2000, this number increased to 524 (24 per cent). In my rendering, this suggests a strong connection between the media content and the "received narrative" of AIDS.

It is also important to bear in mind that at the time the media did not match their interest in the etiology of AIDS with their interest in the most crucial of issues of pathogenesis. Stated otherwise, the media's coverage of the nature and cause of AIDS far outstripped their coverage of news that offered a useful way of understanding how the causative agent of the disease, human immunodeficiency virus, directly or indirectly contributed to the eventual impairment of the immune system – or the processes by which the causative agent made possible the development of AIDS. This is hardly surprising, though. For one, in as far as the pathogenesis of AIDS was concerned, our 'virus hunters' were imbued with an insufficient level of understanding. Mark Feinberg and Nobel Laureate David Baltimore lent force to this reading in the editorial of the *New England Journal of Medicine*:

Humans are genetically heterogeneous, lead idiosyncratic lives, and become infected through a number of routes, and important practical and ethical considerations constrain clinical experimentation. As a result, we are rapidly learning about the role of each of HIV's approximately 10,000 nucleotides, but remain largely ignorant of rudimentary aspects of the processes underlying the development of AIDS in humans.¹⁹

Feinberg's and Baltimore's views are in concert with those of Professor Mario Stevenson of the University of Massachusetts (Medical School):

Despite considerable advances in HIV science in the past 20 years, the reason why HIV-1 is pathogenic is still debated and the goal of eradicating HIV-1 infection is still elusive ... considerable efforts have gone into identifying the mechanisms by which HIV-1 causes disease, and two major hypothesis have been forwarded ... There is a general misconception that more is known about HIV than about any other virus and that of the important issues regarding HIV biology and pathogenesis have been resolved. On the contrary, what we know represents only a thin veneer on the surface of what needs to be known.²⁰

Today some researchers commonly believe that soon after HIV infection there is a high viral load in the blood marked by low-grade fever and swollen lymph glands, followed by a long period of latency, during which time there is a decline in white blood cells, leading to a stage of crisis: the onset of opportunistic infections.²¹ From this reading, the immune system initially succeeds in controlling HIV infection or

¹⁹ D Baltimore and M B Feinberg 1989, 'HIV revealed: toward a natural history of the infection', *New England Journal of Medicine*, 321:321.

²⁰ M Stevenson 2003, 'HIV-1 pathogenesis', *Nature Medicine* 9(7):853-861.

²¹ Epstein, *Impure science*, 283.

holding it in check. Just the same, it is not well understood why over time the victim loses that ability quite dramatically, making him or her vulnerable to opportunistic diseases.²² By my account, this lacuna in the science of AIDS (the lack of knowledge regarding the pathological processes underlying the development of AIDS) reveals the reason that in the twenty-year period covered by this study, there had been very few news reports pertaining to the issues of pathogenesis. – only 15 news reports (0,6 per cent) were found.

The labelling of AIDS a heterosexual disease affecting mainly the peoples of the ‘dark continent’ coincided with the representation of the disease as a plague, a modern-day manifestation of the Black Death. The “ticking bomb”, the “AIDS time bomb”, was said to be “spreading faster” in the predominantly black areas. The number of reports that foregrounded these apocalyptic depictions of AIDS rose from zero between 1981 and 1985, to 240 (11 per cent) between 1986 and 2000. Also significant to consider is that some media reports embodied a rendering of a critique against this analogous representation or metaphorical description of AIDS as a plague. I argue that these reports are an embodiment of revisionism in AIDS journalism, since they maintained a stance against what was commonly understood at the time to be an established fact. Although these reports never denied evidence supportive of the etiology of AIDS, quite evidently they bucked the trend; they questioned the dominant conception that AIDS was the No 1 killer disease in Africa. Instead, TB was declared ‘Public enemy No 1’, the major killer disease among Africans. However, the reader should keep in mind that there had been very few reports of a revisionist kind – between 1990 and 1994, only 29 revisionist reports (1,3 per cent) featured in the media.

²² Ibid, 283–284.

Along with the etiological representation of AIDS was the media's creation of what I call a binary logic, a fundamental antagonism, a sense of good and evil. The media's interest in the narrative of moral protest soared. At this point, AIDS was linked to the 'foibles of the sinful'. The 'AIDS plague' was not only situated etiologically or biomedically, as a consequence of a virus', which directly kills white blood cells among all infected people, but AIDS was also linked to sexual promiscuity. From this perspective, AIDS in the media contained an amalgam of mystery, fascination, spectacle and melodrama not only because it conveyed the sense of a plague for which there was no cure, but also because it was depicted as a sexually transmitted disease, a disease that contaminated promiscuous men and women.

The epidemiology of AIDS, so the media argued, revealed that those afflicted by the disease had common partners who participated in their own downfall – in certain kinds of 'immoral' behaviour. By this rendering, the victims of AIDS got the disease as punishment for their 'sins'. A society wrenched free of morality and chastity, so the argument ran, was staging the groundwork for the compounded growth of AIDS. Media reports that echoed this narrative of moral protest rose from 36 (1,6 per cent), between 1981 and 1986 to 91 (4,1 per cent) between 1987 and 1989. Between 1990 and 1995 the number of reports that accentuated the narrative of moral protest again rose very sharply – from 91 to 151 (7 per cent). Significantly, this rise correlated with the increase in the number of news reports that posited a connective tissue linking AIDS to sex (see table 3 below). I argue that this also suggests a strong connection between the media content and the narrative of moral protest.

Table 3 The interrelationship between AIDS and sex over time, 1981–2000

Period	Number of reports (AIDS and sex)	%
1981	0	0
1982	0	0
1983	17	3
1984	0	0
1985	34	6
1986	6	1
1987	39	7
1988	52	10
1989	41	8
1990	20	4
1991	31	6
1992	26	5
1993	21	4
1994	18	3
1995	29	6
1996	21	4
1997	38	7
1998	18	3
1999	45	9
2000	68	13
TOTAL	524	100

As I have mentioned previously, between 1995 and 2000 media interest in moral protestation trailed off. The media ceased to make a causal relation between sin

(promiscuous sex) and death. Moral protestation was replaced by the theme of redemption. We can see emerging very clearly in this period many news reports crystallising around the idea of ‘partnerships’ against AIDS. Because HIV was described in a number of scientific sources as a slow virus (see Chapter 9), working journalists felt it necessary to replicate those stories that collected around the idea of community-based health care – community care for the sick, including ‘AIDS babies’ and ‘AIDS orphans’, acquired some special relevance. This redemptive quality in the media was captured by a total of 309 news reports (14 per cent).

3.4 Other sources: non-fiction books, articles and scientific journals

A sizeable number of written materials were gathered directly from secondary sources – mainly academic books, articles and scientific journals. In great measure, this was done to compensate for the lack of thoroughness in newspaper reporting (see below). Non-fiction books and articles were found at public and university libraries. Computer searches proved very useful as means of locating relevant books and articles – by author name, title, or subject. I also used the computer to do ‘keyword’ searches. Especially notable among the keywords used to access relevant information were ‘HIV’, ‘AIDS’, ‘lentivirus’, ‘retrovirus’, ‘Black Death’, ‘reverse transcriptase’, ‘bacteriology’, ‘RNA’, ‘DNA’, ‘cancer research’, and so forth. A great deal of my secondary sources included studies in sociology, political science, history, epidemiology and media studies. Some of these sources were collections of articles, while others encompassed long complex studies. To provide a background necessary for the understanding of the social underpinnings of AIDS, I drew on those sources that provoked compelling thoughts on the following:

- the pervasive influence of human agency and social structure in our daily life

- the social construction of AIDS
- the relationship between AIDS and identity, and;
- depictions of AIDS as an aspect of biomedicine – a disease explicable in terms of a wide range of biological signals.

My study also draws from a wide range of scholarly works in science. Scientific journals, you will recall, are the important vehicles of communication among our credentialized experts. As a norm, scientists publish their major findings in professional journals for general discussion and debate with their peers. Among the most distinguished of scientific journals consulted were *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Journal of Biotechnology*, *British Journal of Medicine*, *Cancer Research*, *Lancet*, and *Science*. All of the scientific journals used in this study – published between 1981 and 2000 - chronicled the epidemiology and etiology of AIDS. My familiarity with the works of leading scientific experts such as David Baltimore, Peter Duesberg, Howard Temin, Robert Gallo and Harvey Bialy stood me in a great stead. These ‘virus hunters’ were identified by the positions they occupy at the top of their field of research (retrovirology). This should remind the reader of a research method all too often used by C Wright Mills²³ to identify potential respondents, namely the “positional approach”.

3.5 Newspaper reports: some of the difficulties encountered

Notwithstanding some of the advantages derived from our principal sources, some methodological difficulties did arise. To begin with, newspaper stories constitute a sum total of factual reports. Newspaper reports hardly lend themselves to analytical

²³C Mills 1979, *The power elite* (London: Oxford University Press).

complexity. Chiefly, this stems from the fact that working journalists operate within a routine style of news representation. In great part, this style of reporting owes more to competition for readership. Undoubtedly, the dominant motif in newspaper journalism is to build commercial capital. This overarching goal weighs more heavily than everything else does! In another context, Benedict locates the commercial impulse in newspaper journalism (the intrinsic desire to make money) to a specific combination of institutional practices. In his rendering, the pressures of deadlines all too often lead journalists to fall back on clichés and habits and to spend less time *thinking* about what is written.²⁴

The other problem that arose concerns the media's dependence on scientific experts for relevant sources of information or 'breaking news'. Journalists, it hardly needs saying, are by no means experts as regards the phenomenon that has captured their professional interest, namely AIDS. Without a doubt, in terms of AIDS the media are a dependent culture. AIDS galvanized their cultural experience because they felt deeply implicated in its spectacle. Therefore, the generation of news about the science of AIDS hinged on 'authorization' from the scientific experts. As will be noticed, media's dependence on experts for valuable sources of information has had certain negative effects.

The third limitation as regards the use of newspaper articles concerns the problem of news selection. As a norm, media reports contain those elements singled out by the so-called gatekeepers²⁵ as objects of news. News reports are not intended only *to inform*, to heighten public consciousness about particular social phenomena, but media reports also reside in sensationalism. ('If it bleeds, it leads.')

Sometimes the media engage in

²⁴ Benedict, *Virgin or vamp*, 7.

²⁵ C C Wilson and F Gutierrez 1985, *Minorities and diversity* (London: Sage).

social practices that tend to provoke public fear or terror. Subjectivity is the essence of their inquiry. Those who select the news or make decisions about its content ('gatekeepers') first consider its newsworthiness or sensationalistic effects on their readers.²⁶ Some elements of the AIDS story are effaced or rendered invisible because they do not make news. This is a clear testament to Ekecrantz's²⁷ view that the media all too often operate within a "discursive field", such as values (see also Fiske,²⁸ Mathebe²⁹ and Tosh³⁰). In the period covered by this study, many news reports brought to the surface what Fiske would call "points of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence"³¹ (see Chapters 5, 7 and 8). They replaced accurate and balanced reporting with drama and spectacle. The media's tendency towards sensationalism also compromised their commitment to objectivity, balance and fairmindedness. The consequence was that a number of reports on AIDS became saturated with hyperbole.

3.6 Conclusion: authenticity, reliability and credibility

Undeniably, some of the problems that accompany documentary/newspaper research raise key issues concerning authenticity, reliability and credibility. Note that although the concepts of authenticity, reliability, and credibility are somewhat connected, the fit between them is adversarial. Authenticity connotes "external criticism".³² Here the researcher's main task is to establish whether the document being studied is genuine or a historical forgery – whether the full range of facts embedded in his or her

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ J Ekecrantz 1997, 'Journalism's discursive events and socio-political change in Sweden 1925-87', *Media Culture and Society* 19(13):396.

²⁸ J Fiske 1994, *Media matters: everyday culture and political change*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 8.

²⁹ L Mathebe 2001, *Bound by tradition: the world of Thabo Mbeki* (Pretoria: Unisa Press), 1–16.

³⁰ Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, 133.

³¹ Fiske, *Media matters*, 8.

document are what they purport to be.³³ In terms of this research, major problems pertaining to authenticity hardly arose, since all of the principal sources can be traced back to the newspapers that produced them, and can also be reconciled with general knowledge of AIDS at the time and with some of the information that I derived from non-fiction books, articles and scientific journals. Furthermore, most of the information contained in our ‘principal sources’ was derived from an authoritative source, namely the medical or scientific expert (see Platt³⁴).

On the other hand, the concepts of credibility and reliability conjure up something entirely different. Here MacDonald and Tipton’s point of view is particularly instructive. By their account, these concepts conjure up the following question: ‘Is the document being used free from any distortion?’³⁵ Also note that notions of credibility and reliability can sometimes be compromised by the personal interest of the author himself or herself, a personal interest that may for example be to enhance a reputation or to please the reader.³⁶ These negative constants of storytelling should remind us of the problems of bias and sensationalism discussed earlier. Nonetheless, by no means does this suggest that we should let go of our principal sources or render them insignificant. Bear in mind that some of the methodological problems embedded in written sources might sometimes prove very useful in formulating cogent sociological questions. Tosh singles out bias as a good example. In the case of a public figure, he

³² Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, 57.

³³ *Ibid*, 57.

³⁴ At this point I would like to acknowledge the views expressed by Platt. This study applied some of his insights to provide a background necessary for grasping the role of authenticity in the process of doing newspaper research. For further reading, see J Platt, ‘Evidence and proof in documentary research’, *Sociological review* 20 (1):31–66. Also see Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, 50–80.

³⁵ K Macdonald and C Tipton 1993, *Using documents* (London: Sage), 196.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 196.

says, his or her bias can account for “a consistent misreading of certain people or situations”,³⁷ with disastrous effects on policy.

Nonetheless, any good researcher would do well to minimize some of their corrosive effects. Failure on this front can bear upon the objectivity and impartiality of some of the research findings. In the process of doing this research, this thought hung too heavily in my consciousness. As a consequence, I undertook to do what the media failed to do: I tried to go beyond the simple, descriptive or factual renderings emblematic of newspaper journalism. While the most dominant tendency in many media reports is to simplify, to distort and to sensationalise, the dominant tendency in this study is to reveal the ‘hidden structure’, the latent or concealed structure of the story of AIDS.

³⁷ Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, 62.