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# Subscribing to Governmental Rationality: HBO and the AIDS Epidemic

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### **Subscribing to Governmental Rationality: HBO and the AIDS Epidemic**

By October of 1987, approximately 20,000 people had died of AIDS in the United States, and nearly 36,000 had been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.<sup>1</sup> With this public health crisis quickly reaching epidemic proportions, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop directly faced a television camera to reassure a frightened public. He answered questions candidly and discussed how HIV is contracted, what sort of practices increase risk, and the steps that one may take to prevent contracting the virus. This was not a live broadcast to the entire nation via one of the major American broadcast networks, a documentary for PBS, or even a federally funded educational video for public health departments or schools. Rather, this was an informational program that premiered at 8:00pm on October 12, 1987, on the subscription-based premium cable network HBO.

This program titled *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know But Were Afraid to Ask* (1987) might seem out of place on HBO given its contemporary reputation for dramas such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), but this film was to be just one of over twenty HIV/AIDS programs that HBO would go on to produce between 1987 and 2013. Further, the audience for these programs has not been limited to HBO subscribers. In addition to traditional home video rentals and sales, HBO has made several of its HIV/AIDS programs freely available in a variety of formats and in a number of venues outside of premium cable television. Some of these programs have been rebroadcast on network television, distributed on videocassette with companion workbooks to schools and libraries, and more recently, even streamed on the web via YouTube.

Working in several modes of address (documentaries, after-school specials, dramatic films, and even stand-up comedy), HBO has spent twenty-five years speaking to its already captive subscriber base and targeting others about how to survive and manage what has become one of the greatest global health issues in recent history, the AIDS epidemic. In ways similar to the YMCA industrial and educational films of the early twentieth century, these HBO programs have worked to instruct populations.<sup>2</sup> Just as the YMCA, a non-state actor, used film technologies to shape and cultivate an at-risk population, so too has HBO, a privately owned cable network, used its broadcast and home video distribution to cultivate healthy sexual practices and ethical citizenship. These programs trace a cultural shift from an early focus on AIDS as a public health issue to be dealt with through individualized “care of the self” to a later focus on AIDS as a global pandemic where the explicit strategy becomes reliance on non-governmental organizations to tackle the problem. Additionally, HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming from the late-1980s to today points to shifting conceptions of public service television in the post-network era.<sup>3</sup>

As a biomedical crisis largely explained to the American public via television and film, the AIDS epidemic provides an opportunity to examine how television is used as a technology of governance. Through the use of the Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and biopolitics, it is possible to see how television, particularly in its medicalized and instructional forms, becomes a technology that operates in the service of managing and shaping the practices of viewers. HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming emerged at a complex historical moment in which intensified neoliberal economic strategies, a transitional industrial formation of the television industry, and an unprecedented biomedical crisis converged. This article’s interrogation of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming introduces new ways of thinking about all three discursive formations and clearly

demonstrates the need to further study how popular media forms are operationalized during times of crisis.

In this article, I argue that HBO's HIV/AIDS programming can be divided into two distinct groups. The earlier group of HBO programs (1987-1999) positions the viewer as having the freedom and responsibility to deal with AIDS on an individual basis through safe-sex practices and testing for HIV. These films also encourage viewers to take on sympathetic and ethical responses to those suffering with AIDS by caring for and accepting those who are diagnosed and organizing community action to make a difference. The emphasis is not on the government or a central authority solving the problem of the AIDS crisis, but rather, it is on the individual who can make the most difference by containing and eradicating the virus through his or her own practices.

The latter group of HBO programs (2000-2013) is produced in the second and third decades of the AIDS epidemic and considers AIDS to be a global pandemic beyond the realm where individual action can be the ultimate answer. Instead, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are positioned as the ones who can work to solve this global problem, and individuals are asked to channel their efforts through NGOs (or pressure their leaders to increase funding to them). In describing these two groups of HBO programs as representative of broader media discourse about HIV/AIDS, I argue that the national response to the AIDS epidemic was clearly one of governmentality – not direct action, but directing action. The overall response was to educate individuals and direct practices, have that education and practice internalized, and then encourage individuals to share and extend information and practices by monitoring and directing the actions of others.

By exploring this segment of HBO's history, I bring many of these programs into HIV/AIDS scholarship for the first time, broadening the scope of what counts as culturally important AIDS media. Scholarship on AIDS media has yet to take HBO as its object of study or entry point, choosing instead to largely focus on network television, Hollywood production, or activist video.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, studies of HBO have largely overlooked the cable network's AIDS-related programming, focusing instead on more popular series such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or *The Wire* (2002-2008). In fact, while there is a growing amount of important scholarship on HBO, it has largely focused on the most recent ten to twenty years of HBO, overlooking much of its forty-year history.<sup>5</sup> Intervening in these two groups of literature can provide a better picture of how the history of HBO and the history of the AIDS epidemic are closely related and are indicative of the televisual techniques used to manage public health crises and promote "proper citizenship." This article also makes a critical intervention in governmentality studies as it moves analysis away from the realm of popular reality television and into fictional and dramatic forms, demonstrating that they too may also operate as tools of governance, often relying on sentimentality to shape the viewer's thoughts and practices in particular ways.

### Public Service Television, HBO, and the AIDS Epidemic

Created in 1972, several years after the establishment of PBS, HBO's early history operates as a point of convergence for the goals of profitable entertainment and public service-oriented programming. Cable television in the late 1970s and 1980s was deeply entangled in the discourse of public service at a time when the promises of cable television to demonstrate what was possible in a multi-channel or post-network environment were the talk of the industry.<sup>6</sup>

During the same period that public service television was adapting to dramatically new and uncharted industrial forms, the AIDS epidemic challenged the nation's ability to respond to an unfamiliar and seemingly unstoppable biomedical crisis. At the very moment when a swift, decisive, and unified response from the public health community was most needed, this community was becoming fractured and privatized. The Reagan administration spearheaded deregulatory measures for the cable television industry while also reducing the budgets of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services including the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health. The focus on small government meant leaving many things to private industries or individual states. While the public might have greatly benefited from an overwhelming and direct federal response to the AIDS crisis that would have included priority status and funding from the national public health community and the harnessing of the public-owned airwaves and resources of PBS, this did not happen.<sup>7</sup>

During this time of industrial change and intensified neoliberal ideology, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was under continual attack from conservatives about its content and funding.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, because AIDS and sexuality were regularly linked in the media, it was often difficult for PBS to adequately address the complexities of the topic.<sup>9</sup> It is in this way that the AIDS epidemic becomes an ideal lens through which to examine questions of how public service television is articulated at a time of intensifying neoliberal strategies in a shifting television landscape.

Public service television has never been confined to a viewer's local PBS station. From its inception, American broadcast television has wrestled with the desire to provide profitable entertainment and the obligation to use the airwaves in ways that serve the public interest. The introduction of widespread cable television in the late-1970s and early-1980s created a sea

change for the television industry as the utopian promises of cable paved the way for broadcasters interested in public service television (and favorable regulation) while providing enormous piles of cash for those who offered entertainment. An increased number of channels meant more opportunities for both types of programming and even more opportunities for combining them. By examining HBO through the often-competing logics of profitability and public service, it is possible to develop new and interesting ways to think about HBO and its programming – as one example of what might count as public service television in the post-network era.<sup>10</sup>

### The Analytic of Governmentality

The privatization of public service in the U.S. aligns with a broader trend of governmental rationality and neoliberal economic policies. By thinking through the logics of governance that are at work when media are operationalized in the wake of a medical crisis like AIDS, we can better understand how this rationality permeates society through other technologies of governance. Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, it is possible to see the connections between HBO's programming, the discourse of the AIDS epidemic, and the political and economic rationality that, while not new, has become increasingly intensified from the beginning of the Reagan administration to the present day.

Examining HBO's HIV/AIDS programming requires more than ideology critique. Rather than a top-down understanding of media producers telling audiences what to think, examining AIDS media through the lens of governmentality means taking into account the various authorities, regimes of knowledge, and prescriptive behaviors that create a need for, help to shape, are represented in, and are the outcomes of these media texts. The analytic of

governmentality, articulated in Foucault's later work, allows us to dramatically rethink the relationship between the state, its citizens, and the forms of media that often connect the two.<sup>11</sup>

For Foucault, such logic de-centers notions of power as either being top-down from an oppressive system over a single subject (sovereign power) or power as practiced on the individual body through anatomo-politics (disciplinary power). Through a focus on governmentality and biopolitics we can observe a particular rationality at work throughout society – at all levels and in all directions – put to work managing the population. Through this configuration of power relations, the analytic of governmentality allows us to further reconsider key concepts such as power, culture, subjectivity, and the state – concerns that are at the heart of critical/cultural studies.<sup>12</sup>

As a method of analysis, a Foucauldian approach views language as constitutive of truth and social structures. Through this approach it is possible to see how the language used to speak about the AIDS epidemic shapes media texts and cultural understandings of AIDS and “constructs worlds, problems, and persons as governable entities.”<sup>13</sup> It is through the lens of governmentality that the role of the state and the media during the AIDS epidemic can be best analyzed, so it is important to briefly articulate how governmentality is developed in Foucault's work and taken up in the work of others.

Governmental logic works to define parameters and allow freedom and fluctuation of phenomena with stability as the ultimate goal. As governmental logics are a matter of policing and managing the health and security of the population, this mode of security can be described as a level of equilibrium where there are acceptable levels of loss and risk, lawlessness and lawfulness, and, as long as equilibrium is maintained, some deviation is allowed and expected. Foucault provides examples of epidemics, vaccination, and grain price fluctuation or shortages,

and in all of these examples it is not the individual cases or the single harvests that are important.<sup>14</sup> Instead, what is important is that these situations impact the continual circulation of people, goods, and finance.

It is possible to already see the relevant shades of this logic in the slow national response to the AIDS crisis, the designation of risk groups, and the eventual fear that the epidemic had “reached the general population” (i.e. heterosexuals) – all examples of how levels of risk were able to fluctuate as long as they remained within certain demographics. This method of analysis aligns with work by Samantha King and Maren Klawiter as both scholars have discussed how responses to breast cancer and the logics of the entire breast cancer awareness and treatment apparatus align with governmental rationality, particularly in the current era of intensified neoliberal economic policies. For both King and Klawiter, the focus on distributed tactics of early detection, screening, and treatment has been at the expense of a focus on a broader strategy of prevention, including issues of environment, chemical toxicity, and other realms under the regulation of the federal government.<sup>15</sup>

While this breast cancer scholarship provides a way to see how governmental rationality informs our understandings of, and responses to, a particular disease, other scholars have demonstrated that television may operate as a technology of governance. A number of recent television-related projects have noted that rather than the state utilizing techniques of domination in order to discipline society, an art of government is at work that utilizes a notion of “less government” and helps to shape cultural citizenship.<sup>16</sup> In their book-length study, for example, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay examine “reality TV’s relationship to ideals of a ‘governing at a distance’ and consider how reality TV simultaneously diffuses and amplifies the government of everyday life, utilizing the cultural power of television ... to assess and guide the ethics,

behaviors, aspirations, and routines of ordinary people.”<sup>17</sup> They argue that television helps to enable this governing at a distance and is an integral tool of governmentality. “At a time when privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice are promoted as the best way to govern liberal capitalist democracies,” they write, “reality TV shows us how to conduct and ‘empower’ ourselves as enterprising citizens.”<sup>18</sup>

For Ouellette and Hay, Foucault’s writing on governmentality forms the basis for understanding the state’s emphasis on liberal and neoliberal policies in terms of governing citizens. In the neoliberal model, the betterment of the population is the province of private individuals, corporations, and philanthropic or other NGOs. One way in which these non-state actors operate is through television and other popular media. For instance, television shows such as *The Apprentice*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*, *America’s Next Top Model*, and *Survivor* can be read as teaching us how to be successful, stylish, adaptable, and in the end, better neoliberal citizens.

Part of Foucault’s project, and the project of governmentality studies today, is to no longer think of power and resistance simply as a contest between the sovereign and the subject or the state and the citizen. Instead, the project is to understand the way in which practices, rationalities, and knowledge are “invested, colonized, used, inflected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms and forms of overall domination.”<sup>19</sup> By examining how these tactics, strategies, and effects of power work to inform logics of power that are operationalized (for example, during the AIDS crisis), we can then begin to understand how we may be constituted as subjects within that logic.

AIDS Media, Network Television, and HBO

At the same time that HBO was working within a clear framework of mainstream media and cultural discourse about AIDS, it was also complicating and at times, even rejecting that framework. Despite its position as a subscription-based cable channel, it did not operate in isolation and existed within parameters that were laid out by other film and television productions. Misguided and dangerous understandings of the nature of the AIDS epidemic and widespread beliefs about sexuality often did much to oversimplify the problems and potential solutions expressed in mainstream media.<sup>20</sup> Independent cinema and activist video were often praised for the way in which they handled the complexity of the issues at stake, but network television, Hollywood film, and even PBS have been regularly critiqued for their mishandling of their responses to AIDS.<sup>21</sup>

While HBO made many mistakes, it did manage to succeed in several important ways: 1) Given the freedoms of premium cable television, it was not beholden to advertisers wishing to avoid controversy or film studios concerned about box office performance. This provided HBO with the ability to tackle the topic of AIDS early and often without having to be overly careful about offending more conservative sensibilities. 2) While media discourse about AIDS during the late 1980s and early 1990s treated AIDS exclusively (or at least primarily) as a disease affecting homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and Haitians (“the three H’s”), HBO made significant efforts to combat that misconception quite early. 3) Compared to Hollywood cinema and network television, HBO managed to treat the AIDS epidemic with the complexity that it required. For example, oversimplified stereotypes of homosexuality were, for the most part, avoided for what was considered by many critics to be more accurate and diverse representations, and scientific discourse as well as issues of sexual desire and mechanics were discussed without

resorting to the “baby talk” of network television and PBS. 4) Long after many media outlets moved on from the issue due to “AIDS fatigue,” HBO continued their commitment for twenty-five years, following AIDS as it moved from being regarded as a U.S. public health crisis to a global pandemic affecting the economic and political structures of countries around the world. HBO should rightly be applauded for these efforts, but they are not above criticism. While advancing public knowledge and advocating ethical responsibility, HBO was also falling prey to logics that aligned with a governmental approach to this public health issue. Many of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programs focus on individual rather than collective struggles, and neoliberal rather than more concerted and effective top-down efforts to eradicate AIDS. In these films, private solutions nearly always came before a call for public solutions.

HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming can, in many ways, be seen as a continuation of the original programming that, by the mid-to-late-1980s, came to define the cable channel as a place for innovative, critically acclaimed, and even culturally important programming. HBO’s initial push toward original programming occurred at a moment when the cable industry often wrapped itself in the discourse of public service – offering cultural programming that was not typically thought to be abundant on network television. HBO was no exception and found tremendous success with original programming. This programming combined education and information and embedded these strategies in a popular format emphasizing risqué content and controversial topics.<sup>22</sup> In many ways, HBO became a space for the type of HIV/AIDS programming that could not seem to find a home elsewhere. It is no coincidence, for example, that both *And the Band Played On* (1993) and *Angels in America* (2003), two of the most important works of AIDS literature, were produced by HBO.

At the same time, given that a number of these programs were being produced and distributed by HBO rather than public television (or that television was being used at all as a replacement for a coordinated, well-funded, boots-on-the-ground public health policy) demonstrates how conceptualizations of public service television were part of broader neoliberal approaches to public service, public health, and social welfare. While HBO and other private media corporations were taking it upon themselves to address the AIDS epidemic, and can be rightly applauded for “doing good while doing well,” it is also true that when public service is left to the market-based approach of private enterprise, there will necessarily be concerns and problems that would otherwise be non-existent in the insulated world of a state-supported public media and public works policy.

### A Brief History of HBO’s HIV/AIDS Programming Genres

HBO’s foray into HIV/AIDS programming began in 1987 with three programs: *Intimate Contact* (a drama), *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know But Were Afraid to Ask* (a documentary), and *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story* (an after-school special).<sup>23</sup> These three films and their respective genres set the stage for future HBO productions as the themes, modes of address, and management tactics that would continue for the next twenty-five years. Before moving on to a close analysis of two particular HBO productions to demonstrate the clear shifts pointed out earlier, it is important to provide an overview of HBO’s history of HIV/AIDS programming genres.

#### *Dramas*

As HBO’s first HIV/AIDS drama, *Intimate Contact* was produced for Central Television in

the UK and was aired in the U.S. as a two-part mini-series airing consecutive nights on HBO. It repeated a number of times on HBO in 1987 and was distributed on videocassette by HBO Home Video. In the film, an upper-class heterosexual British businessman contracts HIV from a female prostitute while on a business trip to New York. That the main characters are heterosexual and wealthy is strikingly unique for AIDS media at the time. By 1987 the news media headlines about the threat of AIDS indicated that the epidemic had reached beyond the so-called margins and made everyone a potential target, but this was not yet reflected in AIDS media on television and in cinema due, at least in part, to production lag time. For example, NBC's *An Early Frost* (1985) figured heterosexuals as simply fearful of catching HIV through casual contact with AIDS patients, and as late as 1989, the film *Longtime Companion* would still focus on homosexual men dealing with AIDS. Prior to 1987, early independent films like *Buddies* (1985), *Parting Glances* (1986), and *As Is* (1986) largely ignored heterosexuals all together, and television's biggest stride in representing AIDS as a heterosexual concern was *The Ryan White Story* (1989) and its portrayal of a young HIV-positive hemophiliac. In the case of *Intimate Contact*, when it came to representing AIDS as not just a "gay plague," HBO was quite ahead of its time in 1987.

As in many of HBO's HIV/AIDS programs, *Intimate Contact* deals with overcoming prejudice and eventually moving toward forms of political activism and public outreach. The elements of HBO's dramatic fare visible in *Intimate Contact* would continue with films such as *Tidy Endings* (1988), *Citizen Cohn* (1992), *In the Gloaming* (1997), *Yesterday* (2004), *Life Support* (2007), and, most famously, with *And the Band Played On* (1993) and *Angels in America* (2003). These films (particularly the latter two) often combine big-name ensemble casts, large budgets, and long run-times and are representative examples of the HBO signature style

that contributes to the cable channel's success over the years with awards, ratings, and general prestige.

### *Documentaries*

In 1987, only one week after the premiere of *Intimate Contact*, HBO followed it with the documentary *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know, But Were Afraid to Ask*. Despite the level of media discourse and public concern over the AIDS crisis by 1987, HBO was the only television channel to air a thirty-minute question and answer session with Dr. C. Everett Koop. This program was given prime placement on HBO's Saturday night schedule, but certainly contained no content that would have been objectionable on PBS or even network television.

As the years went on, HBO produced or distributed a large number of HIV/AIDS documentaries as the HBO Documentary Films brand name grew (in no small part due to these films). Many were small documentaries such as *Suzi's Story* (1988), *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1993), and *Rock the Boat* (1998) that focused on stories of HIV-positive individuals. Others were much larger projects such as the Academy Award-winning *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) and the activist video *Voices from the Front* (1992) produced by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). These two documentaries attempted to tell much larger stories, weaving personal narratives with medical and political information to raise awareness for the shamefully slow progress and low levels of funding of the U.S. Department of Public Health. In later years, documentaries such as *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003), *Orphans of Nkandla* (2005), *The Blood of the Yingzhou District* (2006), and *The Lazarus Effect* (2010) shifted the focus from the United States completely and examined AIDS as a global pandemic

with particular attention to the economic and political context of AIDS in countries across the world.

### *After-School Specials*

As the last of its three HIV/AIDS films in 1987, HBO distributed the after-school special, *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story* about a young boy who contracted the virus through a blood transfusion for a broken leg. This program, like many to come, focuses not just on providing information but also on providing moral instruction as the film's message of community tolerance and acceptance is foregrounded. The timing of the release was fortuitous as shortly before the film aired, news media were reporting the story of three young hemophiliac brothers in Florida being the victims of violence due to their HIV status.<sup>24</sup>

HBO continued its commitment to this genre with *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* (1992), *Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nicols* (1995), and *A Dangerous Affair: A Teenager's Story of AIDS* (1995). As in *Just a Regular Kid*, the main character in *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* is a young (pre-sexualized) child who contracts HIV in a non-sexual way. Not Haitians, hemophiliacs, or (presumably) homosexuals, the main characters in both films teach their community a lesson of acceptance. Unlike *Just a Regular Kid*, which spends time mentioning preventative techniques such as safe-sex or abstinence, *Blood Brothers* comes five years after the "explosive" year of 1987 and is less a film in the beginning of a public health crisis and more about teaching viewers about tolerance and acceptance in a world where AIDS has permeated every section of society. The didactic approach continued further with *Eagle Scout* and *A Dangerous Affair* as voice-overs and direct addresses by the real-life subjects

of each film urge the viewer to learn more by calling special hotlines for information about AIDS and HIV testing.

Most of these after-school specials and the Surgeon General documentary were released under the umbrella of HBO's "Project Knowledge" series, a public service-oriented series of educational videos distributed to schools, libraries, and other organizations. The series also included specials on other issues such as smoking, child abuse, and abortion, informing and instructing individuals how to conduct themselves. HBO was similar to many other commercial entities that produced public service broadcasting. While network television has a responsibility to do so due to their use of public airwaves, cable television did so because it aided in their appeals for respectability and favorable regulation and also because it sometimes made good financial sense. Public service-oriented programming was a cheap and easy way to diversify HBO's programming – filling in scheduling gaps, bringing in new audiences, and enhancing the cable channel's brand. While more popular programming would have potentially brought in higher numbers of viewers, for HBO's subscription model, it only mattered that subscribers continued to pay their monthly fee.

### *Comedy*

The one production that does not neatly fit into the genres of drama, documentary, or after-school specials is a notable experiment in HBO's history of HIV/AIDS programming. In 1997, HBO aired *Drop Dead Gorgeous (A Tragicomedy): The Power of HIV Positive Thinking*, a one-man show written by and starring stand-up comic, Steve Moore. The program is funny and moving as Moore uses the one-man comedy show to tell the story of his coming out process, the discovery that he is HIV-positive, and the time in his life where his T-cell count fell to almost

zero. These stories are told with wit and charm, providing moments of laughter to counteract the difficult tales of sickness and fear of death.

The reviews for the special were quite good, and major newspapers and trade magazines raved about the show and focused on the unique ability of HBO to produce AIDS media such as this.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the documentaries, after-school specials, or dramas, Moore's stand-up comedy special is clearly influenced by alternative AIDS media and the type of cultural and artistic work that organizations like ACT UP had been producing since nearly the beginning of the epidemic where even the hallowed topic of AIDS is deconstructed humorously.

#### HBO's Neoliberal Solutions: Subscribing to Governmental Rationality

With this historical overview in place, I now focus my analysis on how HBO's HIV/AIDS programming aligns with neoliberal solutions to the AIDS crisis and exemplifies an approach that exists within a regime of governmentality.

#### *Care of the Self: 1987-1999*

The first group of HBO programming (1987-1999) is primarily concerned with supplying basic information pertaining to HIV/AIDS. These programs position the viewer as having the ability and responsibility to deal with AIDS through safe-sex practices, getting tested for HIV, caring for and accepting those who are diagnosed with AIDS, and organizing community action. While Dr. Koop's *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know...* provided up-to-date medical information to audiences, the after-school specials *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story* and *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* both offer the viewer strategies for understanding, sympathizing with, and accepting into their community those living with AIDS. Moving beyond

prescribing practices, these programs add an ethical component to their instruction.

Documentaries such as *Suzi's Story* (1988) and *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) relate the personal narratives of individuals affected by the AIDS epidemic and give viewers a model for coping with the physical and mental struggles that accompany living through such a public health crisis.

This strategy is not a matter of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services handing out condoms, making AZT free for all AIDS patients, or even taking advantage of their right to use the public airwaves to give daily informational broadcasts and updates. Instead, HBO, a privately owned cable network, is playing its part in the neoliberal state by distributing this programming. The viewer is nearly always positioned as the one who can make the necessary change (practice safe sex, get tested, care for an AIDS patient, accept a loved one with AIDS). For example, in *And the Band Played On*, community activists and individual scientists are figured as making the most difference, reinforcing the idea that federal agencies were ineffective or even incompetent and that more government did not and will not help – that the answers lie within individuals, non-state actors, and organizational movements.

The program that best exemplifies the first group of films is *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know But Were Afraid to Ask*, the straightforward and sober Q&A session where basic facts are related and simple safe sex practices are prescribed. After years of misguided public policy and slow movement by health organizations, and with public concern at a peak, Dr. Koop's special was part of a larger media blitz by the Surgeon General's office. In some ways it was an effort to change course and adopt a new rhetorical position.<sup>26</sup> After opening with the most current statistics of AIDS-related deaths, Dr. Koop brings up the earlier misguided biases against homosexuals and drug users, stating, "now the disease affects everyone, and we

know better now.” Near the end of the program, when asked if AIDS is a punishment from God, he says,

If someone wants to think that this is a judgment from God, then it doesn't mean that this person needs to also assume the role of judge. Even if AIDS seemed to have its beginnings in a class of people that you do not feel comfortable with or that you might condemn for their type of behavior, we are now fighting a disease and not people. We must not ignore these people. We must not reject them. They are part of the human family.

In this quote we can see what Paula Treichler calls the “Western liberal humanism” at work in many of these programs.<sup>27</sup> In none of HBO's HIV/AIDS programs are audiences given instructions that are limited to only safe sex practices. While the few public health campaigns that were at work at the time might limit themselves to this type of step-by-step risk awareness message, HBO's productions use their position to address this larger social aspect of proper citizenship.

Always careful to preface his advocacy for condom use by extolling the safer option of abstinence, Dr. Koop clearly does prescribe condom use as one way to help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, he does not address precautions for IV-drug users, mentioning nothing about needle exchanges or bleach kits – messages that are still politically volatile even today. With the Koop special's prime-time position on HBO's schedule and its straightforward approach, there was a fair bit of hype that surrounded its cablecast. Early reviews of the program called it a “responsible special on AIDS... aimed at heightening public awareness.”<sup>28</sup> The editor of the *Orlando Sentinel* wrote, “CBS, NBC, and ABC might learn something from cable TV about entertaining and informing the public” and called for networks to “[do] more than air one-minute public service announcements promoting condoms. Bring the AIDS debate to prime time

and put an end to the myths.”<sup>29</sup> The documentary was well reviewed and was eventually nominated for a Cable ACE award for Best Educational/Instructional special.

With its focus entirely on information about how to protect you and your family from AIDS, there is not an attempt to provide broader context for the epidemic or to do much in the way of addressing the complexity of AIDS as a public policy issue. Though Dr. Koop does motion toward an understanding of risk as affecting the population as a whole and not just a subset of the population, this is largely done in the service of making everyone internalize this risk and increase self-surveillance when it came to their sexual activities. The special provides information to individuals so that they can make appropriate choices about their sexual habits and whether or not they should find out their HIV status. Like many HIV/AIDS programs that are seen as “public service” programs (both fictional and non-fictional), information about how to govern oneself in the midst of a plague is the primary element.

One might see this special as a televisual component of Koop’s broader strategy – one that includes the “Understanding AIDS” pamphlet that went to every American household. While epidemiological research, drug trials, free health care, and public housing were lacking, the focus of the Reagan administration and the U.S. Public Health Service was squarely on instruction. The logic was that if the population were taught how to govern their bodies, the epidemic would be contained. While many surely had already died before 1987, once AIDS was perceived as a threat to the “general population,” it needed to be stopped, and this type of instructional approach – governing at a distance – was the primary effort. Aside from mentioning that the nation’s blood supply was regularly tested, Koop says next to nothing about the state of epidemiological and drug research or plans to increase federal funds for health care and other assistance to AIDS patients. While HBO’s adaptation of *And the Band Played On* would explore

some of these issues five years later, this early time in the AIDS epidemic was focused on instructing individuals to monitor and protect themselves. Though the promise of an eventual cure permeated the news media (almost any potential new drug was hailed as the one that could end the crisis), the primary approach at this time was containment. The program's video release (distributed to schools, libraries, and other organizations) even included a study guide containing up-to-date information about the AIDS virus, giving viewers as much information as they needed to be able to manage their health without ever having to consult a physician in person or contact a state-run health clinic.

#### *Managing a Global Pandemic: 2000-2013*

The second group of HBO's HIV/AIDS programming is produced in the more recent years of the AIDS epidemic and considers AIDS to be a global pandemic out of the realm where individual action can ultimately solve the problem. This manifests itself in films like *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003), *Yesterday* (2004), *Orphans of Nkandla* (2005), *The Blood of the Yingzhou District* (2006), and *The Lazarus Effect* (2010). The intended audience of these films is not figured as an American family looking for answers about how to protect themselves from AIDS, but instead is positioned as a solitary spectator looking into the face of a worldwide pandemic.

Many of HBO's HIV/AIDS programming after 2000 are collaborations with foundations and non-governmental organizations. For example, *Yesterday* (2004), the first international feature film shot in the Zulu language and South Africa's first film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, was produced with the support of the Nelson Mandela Foundation. Meanwhile, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* was partially supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Both *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* and *Yesterday* are the result of

HBO's collaborations with private interests whose stated primary goals are AIDS awareness and prevention, not cultural production or economic interest. Not just HBO productions, and not just films, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* and *Yesterday* are part of much larger projects to combat AIDS by raising awareness, perhaps sending the message to viewers that these large non-governmental organizations are stepping up to handle the global AIDS problem, leaving the government's role as simply helping to fund these organizations.

As *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know* is the best example to demonstrate the "care of the self" strategies at work in the first group of HBO's HIV/AIDS programming, the documentary *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* best demonstrates the second programming group's commitment to neoliberal responses to the global AIDS pandemic. The film's focus on free-market solutions, the valorization of individuals and community organizations rather than the potential role of the state, and the failure to critique the absence of comprehensive state policies to combat AIDS all work to extend a neoliberal rationality. Of the five countries profiled in the film (Uganda, Brazil, Thailand, Russia, and India), only Brazil is profiled as a model of what a strong central government can do (providing free anti-retroviral drugs to all patients). However, even within the Brazil segment, the film's narrative gives equal – if not more – weight to the importance of family and community. Crucially, in none of these five stories is the state explicitly criticized for failing to provide comprehensive health care to its citizens. This demonstrates the limits of the film's willingness to critique a state's ineffective AIDS policy, despite HBO's much clearer critique of public policy in films such as *And the Band Played On* and *Voices From the Front*. While the film embraces neoliberal solutions to the problem of AIDS and does not critique the lack of effective state-centered approaches, the film does offer explicit critiques of gender inequality in prevention and treatment around the world

(particularly in the Thailand segment) – demonstrating just one of HBO’s long-standing commitments to liberal politics and human rights.

Given its global perspective, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* seems to suggest that educating the American public with safe-sex practices didn’t change the fact that the disease had gone global. As Paula Treichler writes, “While the AIDS/HIV epidemic in industrial and postindustrial societies is believed to be complex, intellectually and politically contested, and theoretically interesting, Third World epidemics are seen to be simple material disasters.”<sup>30</sup> The film seems to suggest that while Western medicine and education has rendered the disease manageable by statistical (and proportional) standards in the United States, it clearly remains an unsolvable problem in the “less civilized world.” It is telling that the United States is absent from the documentary. The film seems to position the pandemic as something that is occurring outside of the borders of the United States and most of Europe. While perhaps Americans and Europeans infected with AIDS may be able to afford AZT, protease inhibitors, or other drugs, they are certainly priced out of the hands of poor African farmers who are statistically more likely to contract the disease.

While AIDS does continue to infect and destroy the lives of Americans, it has arguably become just one part of our cultural landscape, a threat superseded by terrorism and other concerns of foreign threats to our nation: something that the 2003 adaptation of *Angels In America* makes clear, as it looks back to the Reagan-era from the vantage point of the post-9/11 Bush administration.<sup>31</sup> When the focus does actually return to the U.S. as in HBO’s production of *Life Support* (2007), the same neoliberal logics apply. Queen Latifah’s character is an HIV-positive woman living in Brooklyn devoting her efforts to an AIDS outreach group, but despite the economic and material wealth of the United States, the helpful organizations depicted in the

film are not those of state or national public health services. Instead, it is mentioned that these support groups are part of President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative programs.

Additionally, rather than focusing on the effectiveness of these programs or broader public strategies of combating AIDS in urban communities, the film's narrative remains at the level of individual struggles within the community in an attempt to activate the viewer to do their part in this struggle here at home.

*Life Support, Yesterday, Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, and the other films within this group rely on this logic of using stories of individuals as a way to educate and motivate viewers. While the viewer does become more informed and even sympathetic, the effort here is not to instill the motivation to seek radical change (or even petitioning the nation-state to take a larger role in social problems). Rather, the viewer is shaped in such a way as to become a proper neoliberal subject, helping to manage this global pandemic by donating money and calling upon non-governmental organizations to solve the problem. While the broader intentions of these films can be commended, it is still important to examine the strategies at work. The solutions that are represented fall in line with neoliberal economic policy and governmental rationality and are not necessarily the solutions that work the best.

Like much of HBO's HIV/AIDS programming, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* operates as a governmental technology. By teaching viewers about the world's problem with AIDS, it is fair to assume by the prompts in the credits of the film that some viewers will seek out more information, donate to non-governmental aid organizations, or develop an appropriate subjectivity as an ethical consumer – perhaps purchasing consumer goods affiliated with (Product)RED. While the film certainly makes its case in a skillful way, and the efforts of individuals and community organizations should be encouraged, an understanding of the political

economic situations that contribute to the AIDS crisis in each of the five nations and a focus on the rhetorical strategies at work in the film are vital to understanding the film's position in HBO's role as a governmental technology and an example of neoliberal approaches to health policy.

### Conclusion

An examination of HBO's HIV/AIDS programming from 1987 to the present day provides us with an opportunity to see the long view of HBO's engagement with the AIDS epidemic and an opportunity to see how HBO's films are embedded within a cultural response to AIDS that is governmental in its logic and neoliberal in its approach. HBO's HIV/AIDS programming (and the fact that HBO created any programming on this topic at all) becomes emblematic of America's response to the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It also acts as a barometer for America's engagement with the global AIDS pandemic that is devastating populations around the world. In its position as a private media company responding to the AIDS crisis, and in the strategies present in many of its productions, HBO provides an example of how television acts as a tool of governmentality – shaping the citizenry and governing them from a distance.

Beyond the AIDS epidemic, HBO's engagement with a broader set of social issues is illustrative of how public service in an era of neoliberalism has become increasingly privatized.<sup>32</sup> From global efforts to fight disease, poverty, and human rights violations, it appears that private industries and non-profit/non-governmental organizations have taken the lead in many of these causes. While any and all efforts to improve the world we live in should be applauded and supported, the shrinking role of the state (or at least the shift from a traditional welfare state to

something of a “corporate welfare state”) is also a cause for substantial concern, distress, and anger. As Douglas Crimp writes,

Scientific research, health care, and education are the *responsibility and purpose* of government and not of so-called “private initiative,” an ideological term that excuses and perpetuates the state’s irresponsibility. Therefore every venture of this nature should make clear that it is necessitated strictly because of criminal negligence on the part of the government.<sup>33</sup>

Many of these HBO productions can be seen as “necessary” when the government and public media were not responding appropriately to the AIDS crisis. They were necessary in order to bring the Surgeon General into people’s living rooms for a half-hour discussion Q&A. They were necessary in order to bring the anger and frustration of the early history of AIDS activism to viewers in narrative form. They are still necessary today in order to bring the global AIDS pandemic’s devastating impact into American viewers’ consciousness, and they are necessary to remind those viewers of the struggles against AIDS that still exist here in the U.S. That these HBO programs were necessary at all does remind us of the terrible neglect of U.S. public policy, and we must not overlook the failures of the Reagan administration, network television, and even public television. It is clear that there is a place for public and private media to each do their part. With both at work, each making up for the failures of the other, maybe there is hope that we can do better next time.

#### HBO HIV/AIDS Filmography

*Intimate Contact* (1987)

*AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know But Were Afraid to Ask* (1987)

*Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story* (1987)

*Tidy Endings* (1988)

*Suzi’s Story* (1988)

*Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt* (1989)

*Voices from the Front* (1992)

*Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* (1992)

*Citizen Cohn* (1992)

*And the Band Played On* (1993)  
*The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1993)  
*Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nicols* (1995)  
*A Dangerous Affair: A Teenager's Story of AIDS* (1995)  
*Drop Dead Gorgeous (A Tragicomedy): The Power of HIV Positive Thinking* (1997)  
*In the Gloaming* (1997)  
*Rock the Boat* (1998)  
*Angels In America* (2003)  
*Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003)  
*Yesterday* (2004)  
*Orphans of Nkandla* (2005)  
*The Blood of the Yingzhou District* (2006)  
*We Are Together* (2006)  
*Life Support* (2007)  
*The Lazarus Effect* (2010)

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 596.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Walter Greene, "Y Movies: Film and the Modernization of Pastoral Power." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 20-36.

<sup>3</sup> Amanda D. Lotz. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See Linda K. Fuller (ed.), *Media-Mediated AIDS* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003); Kylo-Patrick Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 2000); Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See two edited collections on HBO: Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffery P. Jones (eds.), *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008) and Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (eds.), *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (London: Routledge, 2008). The only book-length published study of HBO's early history is a journalistic account written by a former HBO public relations executive. While incredibly useful, it lacks the critical and scholarly approach that would open up this historical period to a more thorough and productive analysis. See George Mair, *Inside HBO- The Billion Dollar War Between HBO, Hollywood, and The Home Video Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive history of this discourse in the cable television industry see Patrick Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> There are a number of books detailing this history in great detail including Douglas Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988); Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural*

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*Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Cindy Patton, *Globalizing AIDS* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> The politics of public television in the United States is explored in Patricia Aufderheide, "Public Television and the Public Sphere," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8 (1991): 168-183; Robert Avery, *Public Service Broadcasting in a Multichannel Environment* (New York: Longman, 1993); B.J. Bullert, *Public Television: Politics and the Battle Over Documentary Film* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1997); Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995); James Day, *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You How Public TV Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Juhasz, *AIDS TV* and Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* for an overview of this early period. For particular examples, see Ronald Greggs, "AIDS: Chapter One. Tongues Untied. Absolutely Positive: PBS and AIDS," *Jump Cut* 37 (July 1992).

<sup>10</sup> This becomes increasingly important as the funding for PBS continues to erode and PBS draws upon strategies once the province of cable television. See Laurie Ouellette, "Reinventing PBS: Public Television in the Post-Network, Post-Welfare Era" in *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Amanda Lotz (New York: Routledge, 2009), 180-202.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault's published lectures on the subject include *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> For a number of projects that use the lens of governmentality to cultural studies see Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy (eds.), *Foucault, Governmentality, and Cultural Studies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 64.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 246.

<sup>15</sup> Samantha King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Maren Klawiter, *The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer: Changing Cultures of Disease and Activism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Amy Hasinoff, "Fashioning Race for the Free Market on *America's Next Top Model*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (2008): 324-343; Katherine Sender, "Queens for a Day: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the Neoliberal Project," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23 (2009): 131-151; Jennifer Petersen, "Media as Sentimental Education: The Political Lessons of HBO's *The Laramie Project* and PBS's *Two Towns of Jasper*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26 (2009): 255-274.

<sup>17</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> See Crimp (1988), Fuller (2003), and Hart (2000).

<sup>22</sup> For more on HBO's discourse of public service, see Shayne Pepper. "Public Service Entertainment: HBO's Interventions in Politics and Culture" in *Media Interventions*, ed. Kevin Howley (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 127-142.

<sup>23</sup> I am using the phrase "after-school special" for two reasons. First, it best describes how these HBO productions drew upon the aesthetic and mode of address of ABC's "After-School Special" series. Second, some of these programs were actually televised on ABC and HBO and then distributed on videocassette by HBO Home Video.

<sup>24</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Review of *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story*," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> T.L. Stanley, "AIDS Material a Positive?" *Mediaweek* Vol. 7, No. 24, June 16, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> C. Everett Koop, M.D., *Koop: The Memoirs of America's Family Doctor* (New York: Random House, 1991), 195.

<sup>27</sup> Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Lynne Heffley, "Cable TV Reviews: 'Everything You Need to Know' About AIDS," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1987 <[http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-12/entertainment/ca-8805\\_1\\_voluntary-aids](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-12/entertainment/ca-8805_1_voluntary-aids)>.

<sup>29</sup> "Tell It As It Is Prime Time," *Orlando Sentinel*, October 23, 1987 <[http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1987-10-23/news/0150380016\\_1\\_prime-time-hbo-condoms](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1987-10-23/news/0150380016_1_prime-time-hbo-condoms)>.

<sup>30</sup> Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Monica B. Pearl, "Epic AIDS: *Angels in America* from Stage to Screen," *Textual Practice* 21, no 4 (2007): 761-779.

<sup>32</sup> See Pepper (2013).

<sup>33</sup> Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, 6.