THE FIRST DECADE OF AIDS IN BRAZIL: TV PRESENTS A NEW DISEASE TO THE PUBLIC

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Abstract

This paper analyses how the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) has been broadcasted by the TV show Fantástico, from the Brazilian television network Globo, during the first decade in which the disease appeared in the national media (1983-1992). Television, as the main source of information in Brazil, played a key role in presenting AIDS to the public, well before governments, health professionals and scientists had reliable answers about this disease. Twenty-six pieces of news that prioritized the scientific aspects of the syndrome were selected. The coverage has emphasized the national scenario and the scientific discourse, giving a reasonable space for the diffusion of information concerning the disease, informing the available means for its prevention, the scientific advances towards understanding AIDS and the quality of the Brazilian public health system. However, it is clear that it has also contributed to the strengthening of myths and metaphors concerning science, the history of diseases, as well as prejudices and stigmas against its patients, a factor that has probably contributed to drift away the spectator from the disease crude reality. Fantástico has filled in important gaps in the population knowledge, but at the cost of leaving aside the great moral, bioethical and ideological issues.

Keywords: AIDS, History of diseases, TV, science communication

1. Introduction

The television visual language is the most powerful trait that makes it outstanding among the other media. – Despite the fact that images provide more credibility and veracity to the information, they also carry symbols and meanings, which make the TV a big myth producer. The ability of releasing symbols through texts and images works as ideological seeds that are reinforced in the day-by-day life and can be absorbed by social interactions. The symbols that are broadcasted by TV are produced by it, but also reproduced from society on a feedback process. [1]

The television has played a key role in the history of the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), known as one of the biggest epidemics of the 20th Century. In 1981, when the disease was first discovered, the TV presented it to the population when there was enormous disinformation, before even the governments, health professionals and researchers had answers on the subject. Up to 1985, AIDS was not included in the Brazilian governmental agenda, since it was seen as an illness of isolated occurrences, restricted to specific social segments. From this moment on, the Health Brazilian Department established the guidelines for the Program of AIDS Control.

In the beginning of the 1980’s, the information about AIDS had to find a balance between morality - condemning the behaviors of the more affected groups by the HIV (virus that causes the illness) - and public health, as well as trying to guarantee quality of life and medical treatment to the patients. Therefore, the media confronted the challenge of reporting on a deadly and mysterious new health problem in a responsible manner - to inform but not inflame, to educate but not alarm. [2].

The objective of this paper is to look at the TV construction of AIDS as a social reality. Although the first interest of mass media on releasing information about an unknown and fatal illness can be related to its social service role, one cannot forget the commercial characteristic of information. Consequently, information is also linked to its "consumers’” or viewers’ interest. The rising of AIDS as lethal, moral and unknown to science filled in the necessary requirements to be in the media. "The construction of AIDS by the media influenced not only how individuals must react, but also as we - society and citizens - must perform" (Colby & Cook, 1991). [3]

2. The Pre-AIDS period

The absence of scientific explanations about illnesses instigated - and it continues to instigate beliefs and myths about them – and it continues to do so. One of the most efficient ways to spread those meanings is through the media – through its role of providing social services and representing the citizens – that plays an important role within society in shaping to the meanings of each pathology.
Immunology became a discipline in the 1960’s, when there were more evidences on the theory of the formation of antibodies, the identification of the lymphocyte as one of the cells responsible for the production of antibodies and of the thymus as the central organ in the early development of the immune system. This decade and the following one have been described as the ones that marked the greater and more radical transition on immunology. The subject was institutionalized with the creation of departments, scientific societies, the publication of journals and scientific meetings, as the International Conference on Immunology in 1971. [4]

Just before AIDS, immunology had known the reverse transcriptase, a protein produced by the retrovirus that allows its reproduction using the host cells machinery. This discovery was made in 1970 independently by the scientists H. Temim, S. Mizutani and D. Baltimore. Three years later there were already different tests available to identify the presence of retrovirus reverse transcriptase. Afterwards, retrovirus has been divided into three sub-groups.

In 1980, Robert Gallo, Poiesz and colleagues first identified a human retrovirus, coined Human T-cell Leukemia Virus (HTLV-1). Without noticing, science was getting ready for the arrival of AIDS, described as “the most spectacular chapter of the public health history in the period after World War II” by Söderqvist & Stillwell (1999) in their paper on the historiography of immunology. [5] [4]

3. The appearance of AIDS

Different from other epidemics that occurred in times of wars and economic crises, AIDS appears at a moment where medicine had already access to efficient methods that - through the development of bacteriology and the discovery of penicillin in 1928 - assured the identification, better understanding and combat of pathological microorganisms, which diminished the incidence of great epidemics. Within time, illnesses stopped causing massive deaths thanks to vaccines and medicines. It does not mean, however, as Camargo (1994) has emphasized, that the problem has been surpassed, since epidemics often return, which is especially noticeable in countries like Brazil. The majority of these diseases, though, occur mainly in poor and less developed countries, which have a precarious basic sanitation and education concentrated in the less economic favored groups, a profile that AIDS acquired in the 1990’s. [6]

When it first appeared in 1981 in the United States, AIDS was completely new and terrifying. Even though science has unmasked important mechanisms of its transmission soon after it was discovered - which can be considered relatively fast in relation to other pathologies -, it disappointed the expectation of a population eager for answers and problem resolution. This disillusionment increased even more the feeling that humanity was unsafe and fragile. Opposed to this sensation, immunology, as shown before, had already reached a great level of knowledge that would allow the identification of the HIV (pathogenic agent of AIDS) in 1984, then methods to identify it through blood test in 1985, and indication of the first drug (AZT) indicated for the treatment of AIDS patients in 1986.

One of the essential differences between AIDS and other epidemics was the presence of mass media since its beginning. AIDS was the first epidemic in Brazil to be communicated first by TV, connecting the country to the international news agencies and correspondents, which would help strengthen the feeling of non-protection and the speed of illness dissemination. It is worth remembering that the program Fantástico had already international correspondents of journalism and could count on the reproduction of information transmitted by international new agencies, as the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). When the world is connected in a more efficient way, it seems to be smaller and intensifies the perception of the approach of a threat. The news about AIDS started in the United States (1981), passed to Haiti, France, Canada, England and to many other countries, until it was clear that arriving in Brazil was just a matter of time, which occurred in 1982.

Currently, with the internet and satellite TV, this perception has still grown further, allowing the whole world to witness “alive” the collapse of the second tower of the World Trade Center in September 11th of 2001. More recently, we have seen the advance of the Avian Influenza cases by the media in Asia and other countries in Europe and Africa, and the international procedures to bar this illness of high lethality index.

The first cases of AIDS were diagnosed in hemophiliacs, including children, users of injectable drugs, people who had been submitted to blood transfusions and women. Yet, AIDS did not concern the heterosexuals. The news about transmission among homosexuals received much more attention and little was said about cases on heterosexuals. [7]

Not only the media, but also the cinema emphasized the image of AIDS as a homosexual illness. The excellent French movie “The Decline of the American Empire” deals with human relationships inside a group of friends that gather together to eat, drink and talk. Although it emphasizes the infidelity in the marriage practiced both by women and men, AIDS appears as a threat only to one of the characters, a homosexual. This probably indicates a false feeling of safety among heterosexuals in relation to the illness at that time. [8]

A great contribution to the construction of AIDS came from the officially legitimated speech of scientists, which was often full of uncertainties. Since the beginning, scientists as Robert Gallo – that was later considered one of the fathers of the HIV discovery - had strengthened the discourse that the transmission could be mainly by anal sex, strengthening the construction of AIDS as a homosexual illness. As a result, heterosexuals were not considered safer because they would not practice this kind of sex. Even currently, when we take scientific papers as the one by the
hematologist Abraham Karpas (2004), it is possible to identify this construction of AIDS. “The HIV is not an easily transmissible virus and the tax of transmission during sexual intercourse is very low among healthy heterosexuals”. The author continues “it was estimated that the passive partner during anal sexual intercourse is about 100 times more able of being infected when compared with the vaginal sex, thanks to the presence of abrasives in the anus”. Although this statement looks impartial, once it mentions anal sex and not homosexuality in contraposition to the vaginal sex, it is clear that the previous statement indicates, in the author’s opinion, a tendency to let the homosexuals more exposed to the illness. [9]

Years before the arrival of AIDS, the homosexual community started to experience an overture, for the first time in modern history and after years of oppression. In some North American cities, they had already a visible presence in politics. [10]

Gerald Oppenheimer shows how the first pathological evidence of AIDS was constructed based on the description of epidemiologists, which named it as GRID (Gay Related Immunodeficiency), despite the reports on cases of the new syndrome in heterosexuals and intravenous drug users. "The process of defining both the illness and the infected people has been a process in which the political and social perceptions are inserted in the scientific and political constructions of their reality and meaning" (Fee & Fox, 1988). [11]

It is possible that the focus on AIDS as a homosexual disease has caused serious consequences for public health and, certainly, contributed to strengthen the stigma and discrimination against HIV positive carriers. Data from the Brazilian Health department indicate that between 1980 and 1998, there was a clear inversion in the profile of sexual transmission of AIDS. Until 1992 it affected mainly homosexuals, and from this period on, it started to infect the heterosexual population with great intensity. Taking into account that the virus can incubate (without causing any symptoms) for about 8 years, these data show that the heterosexuals of the 1990’s were not aware of AIDS transmission in the previous decade.

The illness challenged science as panacea of humanity. It spread out quickly over both the developed and less developed countries. Almost 25 years later the epidemic did not let go and it has always had an increasing infection index. In 2004 it summed up 5 million new cases of infection, the greatest number registered in the history of AIDS. [12]

Consequently, it is possible to affirm that AIDS can also differ from other epidemics when it is considered that the discovery of the pathogenic agent used to be an essential step to revert both the incidence growth and the mortality index. In the case of AIDS, none of these two aspects is true, when world-wide statistics are considered. The disease continues to spread out among the population.

4. AIDS in the Media

This is certainly not the first time that AIDS is analyzed in the mass media. However, the analyses of AIDS in the Brazilian media have been almost exclusively restricted to newspapers. However, the newspaper differs from television since it is still a product for the elite in Brazil, reaching a small part of the population, which can access better the Brazilian media have been almost exclusively restricted to newspapers. However, the newspaper differs from television in the most popular and hegemonic broadcaster TV Channel in the country: Globo Network. We have selected the program called Fantástico (Fantastic) that contains the summaries of the main facts of the week and in its 32 years of history has gone to air on Sundays, gathering up a great audience index. Recent data indicate that Fantástico is the forth most watched program of Globo with an average of 24 million viewers around the country. It was created on the 5th of August, 1973 with the name Fantástico: the show of life. One of its more important characteristics is to value extraordinary, bizarre and grotesque stories inspired by the genre fait divers - originated in the 18th Century in France as an oral and written way to tell stories. "Fait divers provides subjects that deviate from the norm, allowing the public to feel better about themselves and taking responsibility out of the author’s way of analyzing the story; therefore, the role of the narrator is simply to show the story" (Mesquita, 1999). These categories had been fully taken care of in the case of AIDS. [15]

The comic and tragic elements of the program appear side by side, flowing from one to the other smoothly just as it goes from fiction to reality, or from entertainment to news. These passages between those extremes are not made to
indicate their opposition inside the program. On the contrary, they are mixed in order to break any logical order and the atmosphere of one and the other subject, so that the viewers do not get bored and the realities presented become lighter. Those changes, as described by Pierre Bordieu, are made so quickly, from one subject to the other, that the reflection on the presented subject is not fulfilled, since there is usually a new series of images and information being shown. Another important feature is that Fantástico was a pioneer in releasing news about science and technology on the Brazilian TV since the 1970’s, when it showed the advances of developed countries and it has always dedicated a large space to health information. This fact agrees with the preference on this subject also in the scientific information released by newspaper and magazines. [16] [17] [18]

5. Science Communication

On a modern and technological world it is common to take the scientific reality as the true reality. If it there is the endorsement of science, so there is credibility. But it is worth remembering the importance that daily reality exerts on our relation with the world. Therefore, the scientific reality can be placed as a second order reality, since it is built on top of relations that are established day-by-day.

Since the end of World War II, after the explosion of the atomic bombs over Japan, science, more than never, started to be a problem of us all. It showed its economic and political interests, which certainly touch ethical issues, exceeding the academy borders. In this sense, the media, through journalists, constitute essential instruments to take new debates and problems to society. "The journalistic speech, as the ones of history and science, is marked by the perception that it transmits the truth". Consequently, it can be predicted that the science communication done by journalists is two times legitimated; first by the journalist’s voice and secondly by the scientist’s, which hardly allows any critic or doubt. [19]

Science and technology communication in Brazil is still far away from the level that economy, politics and sports communication have acquired. Since the scientific speech seems to be the only truth, which differs greatly from the other subjects, the only one qualified to criticize the scientist is another scientist. "It is important that the journalist, while facing scientific subjects, continues to exert his right of doubting", suggests Caldas. [19]

In the 1980’s, the education in science journalism in Brazil, however, was still incipient. Science communication was basically dependent on self-taught professionals, and more based on "translating" the scientific facts - as it can be still identified nowadays. By translation, we understand that there is a lack of critic. Therefore, the professionals without knowledge about science politics, economical and ethical issues tend to reinforce the speech of scientists and does not have any autonomy to think or to question them.

It was at the end of the 1960’s and the beginning of the 1970’s that medicine and health started taking the place of physics as science communication favorite topics. Ten years later, physics had been already left behind, as shown in a detailed study of the British press content done between 1946 and 1990. It could be concluded that this process was stimulated by advances in medicine, as the development of polio vaccine in 1955, the contraceptive pill in 1959, the growth of private health insurances in the 1960’s, the development of immunosuppressive drugs (the ones that prevent rejecting of transplanted organs) in the 1970’s, the eradication of the smallpox in 1977, the first baby born as a result of artificial insemination in 1978 and, finally, the arrival of AIDS in 1981. As a consequence, there was a change in the medicine status in society, which reserved a larger space for medicine in the mass media, one of the main allies of the pharmaceutical industry. [20]

"Even when treated as consumer goods, health keeps its power of being heard in any circumstances" (Weber, 1995). Perhaps because medicine is the first field in which the advances of science and technology directly benefits the population. For this reason, it has an important participation in the history of science as well as in science communication. More than any other science, medicine deals with life and death, which go back to myths and the more primitive symbols of humanity. [21]

Among the media, TV has been responsible for the biggest exposure of health and medicine information to the public. Its role as communicator of ideas and information to modern society is undeniable. Therefore, it can be considered a strong ally of communication of science and technology, still very much based on the expert’s speech, or the official speech.

Currently, one cannot plan health campaigns without considering the television broadcast. In the case of AIDS, Arlindo Castro emphasizes that "in many cases the television seems to be the best way to reach social groups with little access to information about this illness". This statement could be extended to other diseases. [22]

One of the difficulties in doing an effective communication of health issues on television is that although the news may transmit good quality information, the ads, soap operas and movies may contradict the transmitted messages. In our study, one example could be verified for AIDS, whose campaigns emphasized safe sex, but it was absolutely excluded of the entertainment program scenes probably on behalf of aesthetic. This contradiction or overlapping of points of view can invalidate any attempt of awareness.

Amongst the health and medicine subjects, AIDS is probably the second most present disease in the media, after cancer. Yet, França emphasizes that the media was not ready to deal with AIDS, as a result of a lack of expert sources in Brazil. It is worth remembering than in the 1980’s the scientific journalism was still beginning to blossom
and the education of specialized journalists was non-existent, which must have contributed to the quality of AIDS communication. Those aspects were taken into account in this analysis. [7]

In the so called information society, it seems a paradox that AIDS continues growing when information is still considered one of the antidotes against the HIV virus.

6. Methodology considerations

The analysis was done after a survey request to the Center of Documentation (Cedoc) at the Globo Network on the news broadcasted from 1981 to 1990, to cover the first decade of AIDS. Using the key-word AIDS 105 pieces of news were located, yet the first one was shown in 1983, which extended our sample up to 1992, in order to cover a decade. A sample of 26 pieces of news were selected according to the scientific aspects of the illness that they covered - scientific meetings, discoveries and advances in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

The focus chosen was not on the scientific content but much more on the symbols and signs related to AIDS and science produced as a result of a cultural phenomenon, therefore a qualitative analysis was prioritized. The analysis started from the classification of the news in the following categories:

a) Sources used (scientists, institutions, non governmental organizations, patients/individuals and others), that show their point of view about the illness.

b) News approach (scientific, social, political, economical).
c) Presence of stereotypes, bias, stigmata (in relation to scientists, science, patients and AIDS).
d) Presence and role of info graphics (graphics, tables, images), music, voice of the narrator appearing in off.
e) Tone (that would be the result of the previous categories): neutral (without taking advantage of one or another position), tendentious (it takes advantage of a point of view and it suggests a partial view of the events) or sensationalist (exaggerated information that tends to strengthen disinformation).

Although the Discourse Analysis is not the focus of this research, it contributed to the identification of interaction between the ideological processes and the linguistic phenomena. The challenge is "to carry through critical and reflexive readings that do not reduce the discourse into the analysis of purely linguistic aspects nor dissolve them into a historical work on ideology" (Barca, 2004). [23] [24]

7. Results

In the history of AIDS, the program Fantástico was a pioneer in Brazil when it started communicating about AIDS in the mass media on the 27th March of 1983. The news was titled "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome: the Epidemic of the Century" and Hélio Costa was the responsible journalist.

There is a great prevalence of experts and of a national approach (61.5%). In the exclusively international news, the country that mainly appears was the United States (3), as expected, since they had been responsible for the first known cases of AIDS and had the highest incidence of cases in the world during the 1980’s. The preference for national topics and, amongst the international ones, the Americans was also verified by studies about the Brazilian TV news in general. On one hand, the interest about the North American research is justified because of its tradition in science and technology communication and development. On the other hand, it reflects the preference of Globo Network in releasing the scientific advances of that country, reproducing the American ideology that was born with Globo, when it needed the United States’ support to acquire technology and professional background to beat competition.

Fantástico offered a wide space for the science speech without criticizing it, as it was the unquestionable truth built inside the search for neutrality, objectivity and impartiality of science, as much as it is done in journalism. "It is clear that objectivity is a value to be reached, as well as knowing the truth is one of the purposes of science and journalism, but we understand that there is a continuous input of political, social and philosophical ideas in science that affect the knowledge" (Barata & Magalhães, 2005). [25]

The belief in science also becomes clear in the program analyses. In some excerpts there are statements that indicate that science is going to solve the problems, either through developing a vaccine, a treatment or finding the cure for AIDS. "We can only hope that scientists soon find the cure for this fatal illness", said reporter Hélio Costa in the news released on the 27th March of 1983. Another example can be found in the speech of Robert Gallo, in the same news program: "In the worse hypotheses the people who already have the illness would be treated, preventing the virus from reproducing and spreading from one cell to the other".

As it often happens in science communication, the journalist translates the scientific language to the spectators without any critic. The scientific authority of experts exceeds the so called scientific neutrality and objectivity, which disclose its values, subjectivity and partiality. [26]

In the analysis of science communication done in Fantástico, Siqueira (1999) noticed that the myth of science also appears in the context of the images, since aesthetically, for example, the scientists or the representatives of knowledge, the experts, usually appear in places that translate their duties: laboratories, offices with great amount of books or technological apparatuses. Among the rich symbolical elements that are frequently present there is the white
lab-coats worn by doctors and scientists. Those are features that according to the author contribute to the mystification of science. In the present analysis, the images of science are exhaustingly shown: essay tubes, laboratories, scientists wearing white lab-coats, eyeglasses, stethoscopes, rooms filled with books, microscopes, images of cells and bacteria in movement in the microscope, among others. The qualifications of the scientists, experts or science institutions are always emphasized, as a way to legitimize the information given. [17]

8. Final considerations

The information on AIDS broadcasted by Fantástico has three main concerns: to attract audience, to fill the requirements of attractiveness of the fait divers genre on the program, and to supply content with credibility and legitimacy. These elements, added to an average of 7 minutes duration of each piece of news resulted in a considerable exposure of the AIDS issues. Consequently, the public was very much exposed to the subject.

The media was not the only one to experience a period of disinformation on AIDS. The biomedical science also had difficulty in understanding the mechanisms of performance of the HIV retrovirus, reinforcing since the beginning that the disease was associated with gays’ sexual behavior. On the other hand, AIDS has recovered the discussion about subjectivity and the limits between normal and pathological, a historicized and dynamic subject that has changed the attention of medicine to social behavior. The media, whose relation with science communication is at many times problematic, in the program Fantástico filled in some gaps of knowledge in the public. Nevertheless, it missed the bioethical, moral and ideological issues. [27]

The intense participation of scientists, particularly doctors, in the programs is not surprising, since AIDS is a disease and the sample was based on programs which emphasized the scientific events. However, the great number of interviews with scientists indicates that the image of science as an authority and, therefore, above any critic, was perpetuated. Not only have the journalists and the TV opted to emphasize the scientific speech to support the contents on AIDS, but also and strongly, the scientists. The emphasis in the professional titles and the description of the research institutions, the science communication without critic, the simple transmission of scientific discoveries and advances, and the constant presence of scientists and science symbols, have placed the scientific knowledge above any other knowledge related to the AIDS issues.

The communication of AIDS did not always have a moral effect. It was possible to identify some examples when the program helped humanize the HIV positive patients, to improve the scientific process comprehension, demystifying science and revealing the problems involved with AIDS faced in the country. But one cannot forget the important role that Fantástico has played when it constantly reminded the public of its moral duties in braking the epidemic and, especially, the "errors" that the HIV positive carriers must have committed to be in that condition. In the case of this enormous public health problem, at a moment where there was scarce information, the media occupied this vacancy, even though it has certainly done it willing to attract the audience and, thus, advertising. The information will never be transmitted only by being informative, but also for taking care of interests of the ones who inform and will be informed. Marques (2001) shares this idea when he says that "(...) we cannot forget to emphasize that the press, even the sensationalist one, had scientific references as their initial sources and bases to release the news about the first cases of AIDS and their possible causes and ways of transmission". [28]

The need for explaining the disease morally and scientifically in the beginning of the 1980’s was clearly present in the programs, which have focused on the scientific speech and the AIDS patients. From 1985 on, the programs brought information about the collective measurements to control the epidemic; the actions necessary to combat its dissemination; the accusations toward the political incompetence and the attempts of science in discovering treatment and vaccines that could improve the patient’s life conditions or even bring about the cure.

Another moment that could be identified is a retrospective look on the epidemic history, in order to extract lessons which started in the 1990’s, when the news started deconstructing the expression "groups of risk", its prejudices and fears, to bring about new meanings and responsibilities in relation to AIDS. The diseased becomes everyone’s problem. At this moment, the scientific speech is not anymore in the spotlight but it gets wider, providing room for social and political unfolding.

The content analysis of science communication of AIDS has also made it possible to see the role of scientists as constructors of the reality of scientific subjects to journalists and media, which then reconstruct them to their public. This reconstruction however preserves and strengthens a great deal of the original speech. Studying deeply not only the role of scientists as source of science communication, but also as "invisible co-authors" deserves to be investigated.

9. References
