ABSTRACT

PEPPER, SHAYNE DAVID. Public Service Entertainment: Post-Network Television, HBO, and the AIDS Epidemic. (Under the direction of Dr. Jeremy Packer.)

This project explores the state of public service television in the post-network era. In this dissertation, the complex history of HBO, cable television, and PBS is set against the AIDS epidemic – providing an opportunity to see logics of governmental rationality, industrial change, and medical discourse at work. This project is therefore a vital intervention in studies of governmentality and popular culture, studies of HBO and post-network television, and studies of the history of HIV/AIDS media in the United States. By examining HBO through the often-competing logics of profitability and public service, it is possible to open up 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.

Chapter one sets up the framework of the dissertation by situating my intervention in studies of HBO, public television, and governmentality. Chapter two thinks through media history in the modern neoliberal state by examining the historical juncture of the creation of public service television, the rise of cable television, and the intensification of neoliberalism. Chapter three works through the early history of HBO during a time of tremendous expansion in the cable industry due to the deregulatory environment of the 1980s. Chapter four examines the tension between entertainment, information, and education through the role of popular aesthetics in public service television on PBS and HBO.

Chapter five provides a history of AIDS media on television and in Hollywood cinema in order to situate a more complete history of PBS and HBO’s engagement with HIV/AIDS programming. This history puts the twenty-two HBO programs that deal with

Chapter seven considers how the examples discussed in this research project suggest the need to reconsider how popular media and political activism may be linked. In this conclusion, I parse the impact of embracing governmental rationality as a solution rather than encouraging the ethical responses of individuals and collective action to pursue state-centered solutions to the AIDS epidemic and other societal concerns such as global poverty or climate change. I end by offering this research project as an example of how reconceptualizing public service television in the post-network era demands a new way of thinking about what public service looks like in the modern neoliberal state.
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Public Service Entertainment: Post-Network Television, HBO, and the AIDS Epidemic

by
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For Nancy and My Parents
BIOGRAPHY

Shayne Pepper is a media studies scholar with interests in film, television, digital media, and political activism. He grew up in Houma, Louisiana and received a B.A. in Drama and Communication from the University of New Orleans in 2004. After earning his M.A. in Film Studies from the University of Iowa in 2007, Shayne began his doctoral work in the Communication, Rhetoric, & Digital Media Program at North Carolina State University in 2007. His work draws upon the traditions of film studies, television studies, and cultural studies. Shayne’s work has appeared in *Nebula, FlowTV, Culture Machine, Scope, The Journal of Popular Culture, Film Criticism* and edited book collections. He has presented work at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, the National Communication Association Conference, the Cultural Studies Association Conference, and the Popular Culture Association Conference as well as local and regional conferences and symposia.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Corporate Media, Public Service, and the State

It is the year 1987. Approximately 20,000 people have died of AIDS in the United States, and nearly 36,000 have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. With this public health crisis quickly reaching epidemic proportions, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop directly addresses a television camera. He answers questions candidly and discusses how HIV is contracted, what sort of practices increase risk, and the steps that one may take to prevent contracting the virus. This is not a live broadcast to the entire nation via one of the major broadcast networks or even a federally funded educational video for schools. Rather, this is an informational program that premiered at 8:00pm on October 12, 1987, on the subscription-based cable network HBO.

Given the speed with which this epidemic grew, became a fixture in the media, and caused many Americans to fear for their lives, it seems peculiar that the Surgeon General would choose to address the limited audience who had access to this broadcast while doing nothing equivalent on network television or PBS. Why was a program of such importance not given primetime placement on all three major networks? Why was this project initiated and funded by HBO rather than the U.S. Public Health Service? This program, titled *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know But Were Afraid to Ask*, would seem to be exactly the purpose for which PBS, not HBO, was designed. What would cause a privately owned, subscription-based cable network to air such programming when the premiere of a feature film or a sporting event might draw a much larger audience and, in turn, perhaps increase their subscription numbers?
These questions prompt a much broader and more fundamental question: What does public service television look like in the modern neoliberal state? While there are clearly a number of answers to this question, it is first useful to consider public service beyond the realm of television. Public service today often takes the form of public/private partnerships, charitable corporate giving, or moral entrepreneurship. Public service may also simply involve private industries engaging in socially conscious endeavors. As the informational program with Dr. Koop demonstrates, in the realm of television, it can even look like HBO. The Surgeon General of the United States appearing on HBO to address the public in the wake of a perceived national crisis is just one sign that common conceptions of “public service television” may need to be reconsidered.

Public service television is clearly no longer confined to a viewer’s local PBS station, and, in fact, it never was. 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 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. The example of this 1987 HIV/AIDS program on HBO demonstrates that even a subscription-based pay channel was exploring this realm of programming in interesting ways.
The trend has continued into the present as public service television continues to take on new forms. In order to understand what public service television is today, and what it might become, it is important to ask broader questions that interrogate our conceptions of how corporate media, public service, and the state are intertwined. These questions are foundational if we are to understand public service television in the U.S. not as a static cultural formation but, rather, as a form of television that exists at the intersection of private industry and the state and is beholden to the shifting whims of both. In answering these questions, this dissertation makes an intervention in the way that post-network television, particularly HBO, is commonly understood. By examining HBO through the often-competing logics of profitability and public service, it is possible to open up 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. The tension between profit and public service sets the stage for the existence of HBO as we know it today and provides a useful way to analyze its programming, particularly its often-neglected non-fiction programming.

The privatization of public service aligns with a broader trend of governmental rationality and neoliberal economic policies. As I will argue, one important way to understand a television culture where profitability and public service are often so closely related is through the lens of governmentality. In particular, by thinking through the logics of governance that are at work when media are operationalized in the wake of a medical crisis.

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1 I use the term “post-network” here deliberately. While much of my project focuses on the rise of cable television, and I treat that in historically specific ways, I want to point to the many iterations of television that we know today. While our current configuration is often called the “post-network era,” it is important to point out that even PBS in 1967 could be considered post-network television.
like AIDS, we can better understand how this rationality permeates society through other technologies of governance. Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, particularly the concepts of governmentality and biopolitics, 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. Of course, in attempting to map out this rationality and trace these historical shifts, a perspective limited to HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming would ignore the larger changes in the televisual landscape from the late-1960s to the present day. A broader perspective is required, one that accounts for the establishment of PBS in 1967 and the rise of cable television in the 1970s and 80s. An examination of HBO’s early years opens up an analysis of the way that these histories are thoroughly connected, as HBO played a pivotal role in the cable industry at this early moment in its history.

Conceived at a time after the establishment of PBS, HBO operates as a point of convergence for the goals of profitable entertainment and public service-oriented programming. As this dissertation will demonstrate, cable television in the 1970s 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. As the subscription-based pay channel with the most subscribers and the most influence in the industry, HBO was often thrust into the spotlight when talking about the capability of cable to bring new life to television audiences. Long before HBO stood

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2 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).
apart in terms of critical acclaim, however, it was just another cable channel that was trying
to find its footing in a fledgling industry.

While there is a growing amount of very useful scholarship on HBO, it is almost
exclusively focused on the most recent ten to fifteen years of HBO, ignoring its nearly forty
years of history. Created in 1972, HBO was not born fully formed as the vanguard of quality
television entertainment that we know today. A focus on this critical period in the early
histories of HBO, PBS, and cable television begins to fill the vast gap in our understanding of
how and why HBO became what some have called “the auteur studio of the 90s.” In part,
one goal of this project is to better understand the history of HBO and, in fact, to think of it in
an entirely new way – focusing on its beginnings rather than its current and more familiar
configuration.

The best way to make sense of HBO’s early history is by focusing on the way the
network attempted to set itself apart through original programming – in particular, its socially
committed and outright public service programming. From almost the beginning of HBO’s
history, this thread of programming was prominent and a key part of its branding strategy.

These programs may take the form of non-fiction educational documentaries or even more
popular forms like historical dramas, but, in either case, these programs are a far cry from the

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3 See two recent 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).


5 The only book-length 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
popular films and series that are typically considered when studying HBO. Of all this socially committed programming, it is in HBO’s HIV/AIDS material that the various strands of this dissertation unite.

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 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 was not what happened.

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. 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. 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.
As a biomedical crisis, the AIDS epidemic also allows us to consider questions of how television is used as a technology of governance. Throughout this project, the Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and “the conduct of conduct” become useful tools for understanding how television, particularly in its medicalized and instructional forms, is a technology that operates according to governmental rationality as it attempts to shape the practices of viewers. HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming emerged at a complex historical moment in which intensified neoliberal economic strategies, a new industrial formation of the television industry, the marriage of new technologies and long-standing tactics of governance, and an unprecedented biomedical crisis converged. This project’s interrogation of HBO’s early history in the 1980s and early 1990s opens up new ways of thinking about all of these discursive formations. Throughout this analysis, of course, we are met with many issues concerning technological change, widespread deregulation, and the formation and evolution of particular modes of programming (many of which would eventually become part of HBO’s signature style).

Finally, as television is as much about audiences as it is content, this project analyzes shifting conceptions of audience during and after the expansion of cable television. For example, the ways in which HBO’s audiences are configured and addressed speaks to the way in which consumer citizens are figured simultaneously as an audience and a public. At the moment when television was becoming segmented into niche audiences (i.e. markets), these markets were also configured in the public sphere as segmented groups based on identity politics. This purposeful combination was conceived of as an audience/customer for
HBO programming as well as a public to be addressed in order to affect change in particular social and political causes.

The AIDS epidemic is an essential part of the cable network’s story and our contemporary national story. In this dissertation, the history of HBO, cable television, and PBS is set against the AIDS crisis – providing an opportunity to see the logics of governmental rationality, industrial change, and medical discourse at work. This project is therefore a vital intervention in studies of governmentality and popular culture, studies of HBO and post-network television, and studies of the history of HIV/AIDS media in the United States. In what follows, I provide an overview of how Michel Foucault’s work in governmentality and biopolitics opens up new ways of thinking about the relationship between popular media and the state. I then summarize the way in which HBO is currently conceptualized in television studies and how film and television studies have each approached HIV/AIDS media. Finally, I offer brief summaries of the dissertation chapters to follow.

Moving Beyond Ideology Critique Through an Analytic of Governmentality

The goal of this dissertation is not to simply compile a list of media texts that represent privatized approaches to public service or to perform textual analyses that demonstrates how a group of HIV/AIDS programs contain ideological messages that sneak into a viewer’s thinking and mask a more correct truth. 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 truth, 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 the later work of Michel Foucault, allows us to dramatically rethink the relationship between the state, its citizens, and the forms of media that often connect the two. The lens of governmentality offers a new grid of intelligibility for the myriad ways in which a unique type of rationality governs this relationship. 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 the lens of governmentality we are instead able to see a particular rationality at work throughout society – at all levels and in all directions. This rationality is put to work managing the population through what Foucault calls a biopolitics. 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 cultural studies.

As a method of analysis, governmentality offers “specifically historicist frameworks which [conceptualize] epistemic practices and technologies of power as historically situated and contingent” rather than employing a method of ideology critique which can be seen as “universalist, synchronist, and ahistorical.” Ideology critique attempts to “unmask the ideological content of language to reveal real relations of subordination” by “[viewing] language as condensing meanings generated by social structures” and revealing “the

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possibility of alternative emancipatory truths.” On the other hand, a Foucauldian approach views language as actually being constitutive of truth and social structures. This approach is central to the project at hand as I demonstrate how, through a governmental lens, it is possible to see how the very language used to speak about the AIDS epidemic shapes media texts and our understandings of AIDS and “constructs worlds, problems, and persons as governable entities.” As I will demonstrate throughout this project, the national response to the AIDS epidemic was clearly one of governmentality – not direct action, but directing action. The overall response was to educate and direct practices, have that education and practice internalized, and then share and extend information and practices by monitoring and directing the actions of others. It is through the lens of governmentality that the role of the state and the role of 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.

Foucault argues that the modern state operates under a system of power that is not one of sovereignty or disciplinarity but rather governmentality. This is not a situation where the state embraces a shift to governmental reasoning after abandoning sovereign or disciplinary forms of power. Rather, Foucault writes, “The state is the regulatory idea of governmental reason.” As he sees it, the modern state was born out of governmental reasoning, and can only exist through such a schematization. Governmentality may be
thought of as an administrative type of rule, which “involve[s] the delimitation of phenomena within acceptable limits, rather than the imposition of a law that says no to them.”

Additionally, governmentality is not simply a form of rule that originates from a single point. It is a pervasive rationality that is

undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects, and outcomes.

In essence, governmental logic works to define parameters and allow freedom and fluctuation of phenomena within those parameters with stability as the ultimate goal.

Governmentality has “population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.” Population, as the target of governmentality, becomes the mirror through which we see the state – made up of, defined by, and its future tied up in, the health, growth, and reproduction of its people. It is the population that is governed, and it is the population that allows governance to take place. Foucault is clear to note that it is not “the absolute number of the population that counts, but its relationship with the set of forces: the size of the territory, natural resources, wealth, commercial activities, and so on.” It is therefore not simply a matter of promoting the growth of the population to its peak level. In fact, a smaller population may be more manageable and actually sought after. The focus, instead, is on policing and managing the health and security of the population. The health and security of the population become the

\[10\] Foucault (2007), 66.
\[11\] Dean (1999), 11.
\[12\] Foucault (2007), 108.
\[13\] Foucault (2007), 323.
barometers for the health of the state. If the population is healthy and secure (broadly speaking this could also mean materially wealthy and content enough to not incite revolution), the state can maintain its everyday functions of administration and commerce.

As absolute growth is not the goal, Foucault writes, “The fundamental objective of governmentality will be mechanisms of security… [of] state intervention with the essential function of ensuring the security of the natural phenomena of economic processes of processes intrinsic to population.”¹⁴ 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, a gentle rocking of the boat 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. Instead, what is important is that these situations affect the continual circulation of people, goods, and finance. It is possible to already see the relevant shades of this logic in the slow 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 acceptable limits.

In its most basic form, the administration of a population is something of a numbers game where risk, proportionality, and statistics are the defining qualities. Because of its scale, and the generalizable nature of its tactics, it is through a biopolitical rather than an anatomo-political regime that governmentality operates. As Foucault writes,

¹⁴ Ibid., 353.
The mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures. And their purpose is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as he is an individual, but, essentially, to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, to intervene at the level of their generality.\(^{15}\)

What is managed (that is, *governed*,) is not the individual, as in a sovereign or disciplinary society, but the general phenomenon of population as a whole. Through a variety of technologies of governance, the population is kept in balance. As Majia Nadsen writes,

Foucault was particularly interested in how liberal governmentalities target *life* through social and scientific engineering, through expert administration and through everyday technologies of the self. *Life* has been a significant problem-solution frame for liberal governmentalities since the eighteenth century. [emphasis mine]\(^{16}\)

It is here that we can clearly see that governmentality and biopolitics are not separate theoretical lenses. Biopolitics, particularly through the mechanism of statistics (literally “the science of the state”) is the way in which governmental rationality operates at its most basic level. Nadsen correctly notes, “Together, biopolitics and anatomo-politics would transform social control as population emerged as a target of government, leading to the dispersion and circulation of technologies of government, what Foucault described as governmentality.”\(^{17}\)

It is through biopolitics that the state is seen and understood, and it is through biopolitics that technologies of governance take place.

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

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15 Ibid., 246.
17 Nadsen (2008), 23.
subject or the state and the citizen.\textsuperscript{18} Instead, the project is to understand the way in which practices, rationalities, and knowledges are “invested, colonized, used, inflected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms and forms of overall domination.”\textsuperscript{19} By examining how these tactics, strategies, and effects of power work to inform logics of power that are operationalized, we can then begin to understand how we are constituted as subjects within that logic. For Foucault, our object of study is not “the juridical edifice of sovereignty, State apparatuses, [or] the ideologies that accompany them” but rather “the material operations, forms of subjugation, and the connections among the uses made of the local systems of subjugation on the one hand, and apparatuses of knowledge on the other.”\textsuperscript{20} So if the logic of governmental rationality has population as its target, and its mechanism of governing is the management of phenomena intrinsic to the population (maintaining security, if you will), what is the goal of the state?

If the state did not invent governmental rationality for its own purposes but was created through governmental rationality, what are we to make of this for our own analysis of the relationship between the state and its subjects? Thankfully Foucault provides a relatively straightforward answer. He writes,

What if the state were nothing more than a way of governing? What if the state were nothing more than a type of governmentality? What if all these relations of power that gradually take shape on the basis of multiple and very diverse processes which gradually coagulate and form an effect, what if these practices of government were precisely the basis on which the state was constituted? Then we would have to say

\textsuperscript{18} For examples of what projects like these may look like see Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy, eds., \textit{Foucault, Governmentality, and Cultural Studies} (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{20} Foucault (2003), 34.
that the state is not the kind of cold monster in history that has continually grown and developed as a sort of threatening organism above civil society.\footnote{Foucault (2007), 248.}

It is clear to Foucault that the state is not an entity that designed a method of governance in order to control civil society. The state is just one effect of a particular rationality; the state is a practice. In fact, “the state is inseparable from the set of practices by which the state actually became a way of governing, a way of doing things, and a way too of relating to government.”\footnote{Ibid., 277.} In the final analysis, the state is not simply some sort of enemy against which we should fight. The state, and our relationship to it, is simply the effect of an operationalized rationality of governmentality.

So where does that leave us as scholars? Where does that leave our analysis and our intervention? In order to answer that question, two examples of recent projects that take up the lens of governmentality help to demonstrate the aim of governmentality studies – to analyze the very technologies (or practices) of governance at work in our society. These projects demonstrate 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.” Governmentality scholars have taken as their object of study subjects as diverse as museums, mobility, media citizenship, and even sewer systems.\footnote{See Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jeremy Packer, Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Toby Miller, Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Toby Miller, Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Thomas Osborne, “Security, and Vitality: Drains, Liberalism, and Power in the Nineteenth Century” in Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and Rationalities of Government, ed. Andre Barry et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 99-121.} In what follows, I will provide an
overview of two particular projects relevant to this dissertation as they address two of the major concerns of my own project: television and disease.

Governmentality scholars have discussed the ways in which 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. Samantha King, for example, writes in *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* that her project is to “[analyze the] current preoccupation with consumer-oriented philanthropic solutions to social problems, examine the concomitant appearance of a plethora of new techniques of soliciting corporate and individual donations of time and money, and analyze the explosion of discourse on the subject of charity.”

She notes that this has happened at a time when “these shifts have played a crucial role in the emergence of a reconfigured ‘neoliberal’ state formation in which boundaries between the state and the corporate world are increasingly blurred.” King argues that this discourse has altered what it means to be a good, responsible, citizen and what it means to take political action. Similarly, in *The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer*, Maren Klawiter has taken up the subject of breast cancer awareness and treatment in order to focus on the biopolitical aspects of governmental rationality. Keying in on a growing regime of biomedicalization, Klawiter sees women as being part of a new discourse of risk that includes,

the development of new screening practices, their expansion into asymptomatic populations, the reconstitution of normal healthy women as asymptomatic, the virtually simultaneous reconstitution of asymptomatic women as risky subjects, and

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finally, the gradual transformation of breast cancer from an either-or condition to an expansive disease continuum that included all adult women.\textsuperscript{25}

Klawiter notes that this regime of biomedicalization is dispersed throughout the entire social body rather than resting solely or even primarily with the state. She sees the public administration of disease and the individual management of disease as aligning with the dual strategies of biopolitics and anatomo-politics. For both Klawiter and King, 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.

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 who have taken up governmentality in their work have demonstrated that television may operate as a technology of governance. Several recent television projects have demonstrated 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.\textsuperscript{26}

In their study of reality television, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay examine “reality TV’s relationship to ideals of a ‘governing at a distance’ and consider how reality TV

\textsuperscript{25} Maren Klawiter, \textit{The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer: Changing Cultures of Disease and Activism} (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xxviii.

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.”

They argue that television helps to enable this governing a distance and is an integral tool of governmentality. They write, “At a time when privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice are promoted as the best way to govern liberal capitalist democracies, reality TV shows us how to conduct and ‘empower’ ourselves as enterprising citizens.” 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 non-governmental organizations, and one way in which these non-state actors operate is through television and other popular media. It becomes possible to see that “by aligning TV viewers with a proliferating supply of techniques for shaping and guiding themselves and their private associations with others, reality TV has become the quintessential technology of advanced or ‘neo’ liberal citizenship.”

Through the work of Ouellette and Hay and others, it is clear that television shows such as The Apprentice, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Extreme Makeover Home Edition, America’s Next Top Model, and Survivor are teaching us how to be successful, stylish, adaptable, and in the end, better neoliberal citizens.

All three of these projects focus on what is commonly referred to as an era of neoliberalism and treat that in historically specific ways, but it is important to remind

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ourselves that the logics of governmentality extend well before this period. As Foucault traces governmentality through economic liberalism and neoliberalism he sees not radical breaks but “point[s] of inflection in the curve of its development.”

As James Hay writes, “Neoliberalism is seen to build upon a long-standing tendency in nineteenth- and early twentieth century liberalism to bring government *indirectly* into projects of social improvement, while rejecting all forms of *direct* State control, particularly forms of socialism that emerged in Europe during the 1920s and ‘30s.”

Ouellette and Hay note, “Liberalism is based on a paradox, then, in that while it advocates governing through (as opposed to against) freedom, it also expects individuals to govern themselves properly – to choose order over chaos and good behavior over deviance.”

By giving individuals the tools, and instructing them how to use them, neoliberalism empowers citizens to act for themselves, managing their own situations or appealing to organizations that will help them rather than relying on centralized social welfare from the state. The authors further “underscore the extent to which television culture is an object of regulation, policy, and programs designed to nurture citizenship and civil society, and an instrument for educating, improving, and shaping subjects.” As we will see, it is in PBS and HBO that the expression of these ideals comes up against a television culture that seems to have become inseparable from commercialism and profitability.

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32 Ibid., 14.
As in the work done on breast cancer by Samantha King and Maren Klawiter and the work on reality television by Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, the analytic of governmentality becomes a useful one in examining the cultural history of the AIDS epidemic in the United States in its form as medicalized television: that is, television used as a technology for managing public health. Building upon this work, part of this dissertation will analyze HBO’s production of AIDS-related programming as a technology of governance designed to manage the public health crisis from 1987 to the present day. Drawing from the broader literature of governmentality studies, I position HBO’s role in the AIDS epidemic as one that reflects the state’s reliance on governmental tactics and neoliberal policies, where individuals and non-state actors take on the task of fighting the AIDS epidemic. My focus on television in general and on HBO in particular, as a privately owned, subscription-based, cable network, makes use of this scholarship in order to characterize television as a tool, or technology, which helps to produce changes in the viewing audiences, making them more informed, self-governing, neoliberal citizens. This creates a more perfect and healthy subject who can survive what was, in the minds of many Americans, a plague that had the potential to wipe out unprecedented numbers of the population.

Beyond just a focus on the AIDS epidemic, I utilize the analytic of governmentality to understand how these technologies of governance work in privatized and popular forms of public service television. When applying the logic of this governmental rationality to our recent history and examining the intensification of neoliberal policies and the shrinking of the state, a clearer picture of public service television begins to form. From the birth of PBS, through the rise of cable television and the establishment of HBO, to the subsequent
defunding of public service broadcasting and deregulation of cable industries, this governmental rationality gives us a particular grid of intelligibility that renders these disparate yet wholly connected transitions and transformations understandable.

Rethinking the Histories of HBO and AIDS Media

If one were to take an inventory of HBO’s extensive programming lineup over the years, a particular trend of informational and socially committed programming would solidly appear. Somewhere between television premieres of theatrically released feature films, HBO original films, television series such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), mini-series such as *John Adams* (2008), and frequent heavyweight boxing championships, there have been an increasing number of informational documentaries, educational programs, historical dramas, and politically engaged films and mini-series. This cultural programming is critically acclaimed, popular, and a central part of the cable network’s strategy to market itself as an elevated and hybrid form of television and cinema.

Unfortunately, these programs have remained under the radar in academic literature that takes HBO as its object of study. This scholarship relies on a commonly used dichotomy to analyze HBO: the cable network is often contrasted with network television on one hand and Hollywood cinema on the other. Since it does not rely on advertising revenue and is free to air content not allowed on network television or basic cable, HBO is thought to be very different from network television. HBO is also often contrasted with Hollywood filmmaking because it operates within a very different economic model. HBO’s distribution situation (on television, DVD, and even occasionally theatrically) allows productions to be more
experimental with length, form, and content. These comparisons work to differentiate HBO from network television and Hollywood cinema in order to claim that HBO is unique and worthy of study.

While it is true that HBO deserves its fair share of scholarly attention, this type of comparison is inadequate on its own. HBO’s large subscriber base, critically acclaimed programming, and innovative distribution strategies offer scholars rich entry points to study a variety of aesthetic, industrial, and technological issues. However, in order to more fully understand HBO’s position in the media landscape, it cannot be studied in isolation from a broader cultural context. Textual analysis of HBO’s popular programming is important, but a more in-depth industrial study is required if the sub-field of “HBO studies” is ever to become more than a trend chaser. Though current scholarship treats HBO as a third object in the network television/Hollywood cinema divide, it is a media entity with a long and complex history that renders this simple dichotomy woefully incomplete.

In AIDS media scholarship, there has often been a similarly deficient dichotomy. Over the years, scholars in film and television studies have largely grouped AIDS media into two opposing camps: “mainstream” or “alternative” media. Mainstream media is considered to be the realm of network television and Hollywood cinema while alternative media takes the form of activist video, New Queer Cinema, art installations, and multimedia.

33 I am deliberately using the phrase “AIDS media” when describing these production trends as this has become the commonly used term in scholarly work. Throughout the rest of this dissertation, when mentioning a particular program, I use the phrase “HIV/AIDS program” as a more accurate description of the content. For an overview of AIDS media scholarship, see Linda K. Fuller (ed.), Media-Mediated AIDS (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003).
projects. With over twenty HIV/AIDS programs produced between 1987 and 2011, HBO’s engagement with the AIDS epidemic complicates matters and offers a previously understudied area that, once examined, will offer a fuller picture of how AIDS is represented and understood across media. HBO’s HIV/AIDS productions vary in approach, scope, form, and content in ways that do not always fall neatly into categories of “mainstream” or “alternative,” and these productions allow us to reconsider the way in which AIDS media is often understood and defined by its medium. These programs also allow us to take a step toward realizing that what counts as activism (be it “mainstream” or “alternative”) often depends a great deal (if not entirely) upon its context.

Through these HIV/AIDS productions, we can see that HBO’s meteoric rise to the heights of cultural relevancy and critical acclaim coincides with the exploding crisis of AIDS, and charting that relationship offers us an as-yet untold piece of this epidemic’s narrative and the historical narrative of HBO. Using its large pay-cable audiences and massive distribution networks, HBO has, over the past two-and-a-half decades, focused a substantial amount of attention on the AIDS epidemic, in part through what it often considered as its public service – sometimes explicitly drawing attention to this motivation as in HBO’s “Project Knowledge” series of educational videos. HBO has worked to establish itself as an entertainment giant known for innovative and smart programming, and it has done so, to some degree, through these HIV/AIDS productions.

34 For an in-depth study of alternative or activist AIDS video, and for a nuanced discussion of these two categories, see Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
In exploring this segment of HBO’s history this dissertation brings these HIV/AIDS programs into the scholarly conversation 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. On the other hand, studies of HBO have overlooked the cable network’s AIDS-related programming, focusing instead on more popular series such as Sex and the City (1998-2004), Six Feet Under (2001-2005), or The Wire (2002-2008). This overlooked material is crucial for studies of HBO and studies of AIDS media. In order to more fully understand HBO’s engagement with the AIDS epidemic, we must contextualize this programming within the history of AIDS discourse while simultaneously situating it among activist video, print and television news media, New Queer Cinema, and of course, mainstream Hollywood productions.

When combined, intervening in these two groups of literature does more than expand our corpus of programs and fill gaps in scholarship. The result of such a combination gives us a better picture of how the history of HBO and the history of the AIDS epidemic are closely related and indicative of the televisual techniques used to manage public health crises and promote “proper citizenship.” This project also makes a critical intervention in governmentality studies as it moves studies of governmentality and television away from the realm of reality television and into fictional and dramatic forms. In addition to the documentary programs analyzed, this project also explores how dramatic programs may also operate as tools of governance, often relying on sentimentality to resonate emotionally with a viewer in order to shape the viewer in a particular way.
Furthermore, utilizing Foucault’s notion of the “care of the self,” it is possible to analyze a number of strategies that this programming has employed, such as prescribing particular safe-sex practices and encouraging viewers to take on sympathetic and ethical responses to those suffering with AIDS. The early history of AIDS in the United States is one where specific groups were isolated, marginalized, and even criminalized. Because aspects of their lifestyle were outside of the “mainstream,” the prescriptive messages targeted to the “general population” did not address the important particularities of those most at risk. In addition to considering how these representational strategies have targeted particular audiences, this project also examines the ideological and practical constraints that have shaped the messages of these productions by, in part, analyzing the differences between network television, Hollywood cinema, and cable television. I argue that because of these differences, HBO acts as a point of convergence and as a producer of cultural productions that can be informative and even progressive while still operating within a particular discursive field, subject to the power relations that define its position and to the larger governmental rationality that pervades society. These practical constraints and borders are policed by, among other things, concerns of economics, historic precedent, genre, and narrative logic – all of which are considered in the chapters to come.

This theoretical lens also demonstrates that a shift can be seen in HBO’s AIDS-related programming from an early focus on AIDS as a public health issue to be dealt with through individual “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. I will demonstrate that the first group of HBO programs (1987-1999) positions the viewer as
having the freedom 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 to make a difference. The emphasis is not on the government solving the
problem of the AIDS crisis, but, rather, it is the individual who can make the most difference
by containing and eradicating the virus through his or her own individual practices. The latter
group of HBO programs (2000-2011) is produced in the second and third decades of the
AIDS epidemic and considers AIDS to be a global pandemic out of the realm where
individual action can be the ultimate answer. Instead, non-governmental organizations are
positioned as the ones who can work to solve this global problem. Individuals are positioned
as only being able to pressure the government to increase funding to these aid organizations,
and the organizations, not the government, are figured as the focal points in the effort to rid
the world of AIDS.

While recent scholarship has begun to create a more complete account of HBO’s
position in the media landscape, this dissertation argues that, rather than thinking of HBO as
simply different from (or a hybrid of) network television and Hollywood cinema, HBO
should be understood in relation to PBS as a new and more productive way of accounting for
much of HBO’s programming and its position in the television landscape. Using the work of
PBS scholars such as Laurie Ouellette, Patricia Aufderheide, and James Ledbetter, we can
understand the history of HBO alongside, and through, the history of PBS. These scholars

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35 See Laurie Ouellette, Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the People (New York: Columbia
University Press, 2002); Patricia Aufderheide, “Public Television and the Public Sphere,” Critical
Studies in Mass Communication 8 (1991): 168-183; James Ledbetter, Made Possible By... The Death
have, in recent years, worked to characterize PBS as the site where ideas of what public service television could and should be in the United States have been hotly contested.

More than any other critique from the Left, the one most often leveled at PBS is that, because of its funding structure, PBS is limited in its ability to meaningfully contribute to debates that involve controversial topics. Patricia Aufderhide writes, “Public television post-1967 has suffered dramatically from the incursions from both government and economic interests, and it has been hamstrung by its vague mandate, its self-identification as another broadcast service, and its inability to marshal public support.”36 It is because of these limitations that PBS is now often characterized as genteel programming rather than politically conscious programming that furthers democracy through vigorous debate over important issues. As Ouellette notes, “Public television may have the potential to bring socially legitimated culture and knowledge into every living room, but it also has embraced elitism and marginalization by doing so.”37

Unlike the funding structure of PBS, HBO (as a for-profit and highly profitable cable channel) is not forced to consider the same questions that PBS does regarding what might be considered offensive. Likewise, its position as a pay-cable channel (with all the freedom such a position entails) allows HBO to transcend what might be possible on commercial-based network television or basic cable. Because of these factors, HBO can critique dominant ideology from its privileged position, while still maintaining its hegemonic placement in the global entertainment industry. While HBO does highlight controversial topics and even critique public policy at times, this project demonstrates that it often does so, in part, as a

36 Aufderheide (1991), 175.
37 Ouellette (2002), 104.
marketing strategy and branding tactic in order to enhance its status as a risk-taking source of quality entertainment found nowhere else. Of course many other strategies are at work and will also be explored in this dissertation. For example, HBO often utilizes ensemble casts with big-name stars and works within standard generic and narrative forms, which, unlike activist AIDS video, is often more easily palatable to (and perhaps more effective for) a wider audience.

With all of this in mind, this dissertation traces the history of HBO’s relationship with PBS, particularly in relation to debates surrounding the role of public television in American society, the economic and technological boom of the cable industry in the late-1970s and early 1980s, and the battles over PBS’s funding that still continue to this day. I examine HBO’s increasing commitment over the years to informational and socially committed programming in order to evaluate PBS and HBO as offering critiques of culture and policy while still being entirely caught up in an intensification of neoliberal ideology and a governmental rationality that works to manage the population by governing at a distance. In order to do this, my project is largely an historical one in which I rely on a method that draws from Foucauldian archaeology and genealogy. In the case of HBO, this means taking into consideration more than just programming (new or old). It means examining industry discourse in the early years of cable television that helped to shape HBO. It means taking into account the entire apparatus of producers, subjects, audiences, and cable companies that play a part. This is done in order to understand how HBO has been talked about and how HBO has talked about itself. For this project, thinking historically about HBO means reaching further back than what’s currently playing on the Sunday-night lineup and
acknowledging that, as media studies scholars, our Netflix or TiVo queues cannot be the extent of our HBO archive.

Of course, the archive is not simply a broader corpus of programs. If we were to simply extend our textual analysis to the first two decades of HBO’s programming, we are only slightly closer to a more complete understanding of HBO’s forty-year history. Our archive, and our analysis, must think outside the text. As a term that is continually reconceptualized, renewed, and debated, “the archive” can be the ever-growing apparatus that links objects and discourse together. As Jeremy Packer writes, “[The archive] doesn’t zero in on media content as such but rather tries to map the surrounding terrain where the crucial battles took place that determined how media and communications would be enacted.”38 The archive, in this sense, is not simply just the body of texts. It is also the system that framed and/or created those texts and subsequently gave them meaning. It is essentially the closest thing we have to recreating historical context, and without excavation of this material, all current and future studies will be, in some sense, ahistorical and incomplete. Working toward a more complete history of HBO necessitates reconstructing the story of a particular moment in the early history of cable television. In many ways, the story of HBO is the story of cable, and that is the story of the technologies, commercial interests, and regulatory decisions that framed its expansion. On its own, textual analysis of HBO programming is unable to piece together the ways in which HBO executives made deliberate decisions early in the network’s history to steer programming away from sporting events and

second-rate Hollywood fare and toward a more high-brow, culturally important, and critically acclaimed line of programming that we discuss ad-infinitum today.

Using these resources, as well as a broader corpus of programming found on HBO, PBS, and cable television channels, we can think through not only HBO’s early history in the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s but also how that history is absolutely bound up with changes in television more broadly. This project makes use of an archive that includes award speeches, interviews with filmmakers and executives, program listings, and of course the programming itself. It makes use of popular programming as well as programming that would be essentially lost to the public if it were not for various film and television archives. Overall, these HIV/AIDS programs consist of everything from low-budget documentaries to epic ensemble dramas, from after-school specials to stand-up comedy acts. These forgotten programs are texts that work to complete our understanding of HBO, post-network television, and the AIDS epidemic while also shining a light on the significant artistic achievements of activists in the midst of what was sometimes a fight for their life in the face of a ghastly plague. Sometimes heartwarming and even funny, but more often devastating and furious, these texts deserve our attention and allow us to bear witness to this important struggle in our nation’s recent history. Taken together, this archive is one that intersects the history of cable television with the discursive formation of the AIDS epidemic, AIDS activism, and public policy, and it is an archive that both HBO scholarship and AIDS scholarship has largely ignored.

It is the intent of this dissertation to write what Foucault calls “a history of the present.” By reclaiming these programs, statements, and the political positions taken by these
HIV/AIDS programs, we are able to have a fuller understanding of how corporate media, public service, and the state are bound up in a larger governmental rationality. This rationality is most often visible in neoliberal approaches to issues of government in the institutional and bureaucratic sense (i.e. dismantling the welfare state, defunding PBS, and deregulating media industries). Once this history is written, it is then possible to give voice to alternative practices and alternatives to this governmental rationality, which were hidden by prevailing media practices. It is only then that it is possible to have a clear picture of where we are today and what public service television, ethical spectatorship, and even political activism look like in the modern neoliberal state.

Chapter Summaries

In the first four chapters, I demonstrate how the domains of corporate media, public service, and the state are connected through a long and complex history. In the final three chapters, I demonstrate how these same domains are operationalized in the wake of a biomedical crisis, namely, the AIDS epidemic. Chapter two, “From the New Deal to Morning in America: Television, Regulation, and Public Service,” thinks through media history in the modern neoliberal state by examining the historical juncture of the creation of public service television, the rise of cable television, and the intensification of neoliberalism. Focusing on the period from the F.D.R. administration to the Reagan administration, I examine the establishment and dismantling of the welfare state, the creation and almost immediate defunding of PBS, and the transition from the network era to the post-network era via the rise of cable television within a deregulatory agenda. I focus particularly on the
impact of neoliberalism on media and the arts in their most educational, informational, and public service-oriented forms. I situate this argument within the broader history of radio and television in the United States, arguing that tension between profitability and public service has always been a defining factor.

In chapter three, “Finding the Magic Recipe: Rethinking the History of HBO,” I work through the early history of HBO as it grows during a time of tremendous expansion in the cable industry due to the deregulatory environment of the 1980s. I bring together disparate histories of this time period to offer the first full, scholarly account of HBO’s early years, relying primarily upon trade journals like Cablevision, newspaper articles, programming guides, press releases, and reviews. My focus is on tracing HBO’s early years of trial and error until settling upon a programming model that operates through two competing sensibilities: becoming an arbiter of taste by offering critically acclaimed, culturally relevant programming while at the same time also offering edgy, risqué, and even controversial entertainment. Citing early examples such as Time Was (1979), Consumer Reports (1979-1997), and Candid Candid Camera (1979-1981), I demonstrate that, at various points, one sensibility won out over the other but that these dual logics have shaped HBO all the way to present day. I also demonstrate that, in order to become that arbiter of taste, HBO drew from forms of programming that were the largely the province of PBS. Because of increasing competition from commercial broadcasters and other subscription based pay-channels, HBO needed to find the thing that would set it apart, and, to find it, HBO began to create programming that was normally associated with not one of its cable competitors or network television but with public television.
Chapter four, “‘If PBS Doesn’t Do It, Who Will?’ Popular Aesthetics and Public Service Television,” examines the tension between entertainment, information, and education through the role of popular aesthetics in public service television. In this chapter, I discuss the limits of critique within PBS programming and how these programs were often pressured to be apolitical. I demonstrate that where PBS was often limited, HBO was free to explore and take risks. I examine how Independent Television Services (ITVS) and PBS series like Frontline and P.O.V. influenced HBO programming logics, and I discuss how the presence or absence of popular aesthetics was often a determinant of success or failure. I demonstrate that while PBS only utilized popular aesthetics in their children’s programming, HBO used popular aesthetics in the bulk of its cultural programming. As an example of how popular aesthetics affected content when dealing with the same issue, I compare two informational programs, AIDS: Changing the Rules (PBS) and AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know But Were Afraid to Ask (HBO), as examples of these competing logics at work in 1987. These two programs appeared almost simultaneously, took opposing approaches with different modes of address, and were received in remarkably different ways. I also examine how conceptions of audience determined the political positions included in (or validated by) the programming on both channels.

Chapter five, “Media Narratives Constructed: The AIDS Epidemic, Media Discourse, and HBO,” begins the second part of the dissertation, which more fully examines the way in which HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming operates as a technology of governance in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. In this chapter, I provide an overview of how media narratives of AIDS were constructed and deconstructed, and I work through a brief history of AIDS media
on television and Hollywood cinema in order to situate a more complete history of PBS and HBO’s engagement with AIDS media. This history puts the twenty-two HBO programs that deal with AIDS in direct conversation with how network television, PBS, and cable television have constructed the narrative of the AIDS epidemic. I discuss how these early programs were part of (or sometimes rejected) a discourse that perceived the AIDS crisis as initially a disease of homosexuals only to later become a disease that affected the “general population.” These programs draw upon a variety of forms and complicate and supplement the material that was available on network television and in Hollywood cinema, demonstrating that HBO was an incredibly important space for HIV/AIDS programs at a time when many other media producers were not addressing the complexity of the AIDS epidemic.

I adapt the arguments of Ouellette and Hay to the realm of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming, thinking through the ways in which this programming operates as a governmental technology. In doing so, I examine HBO’s “Project Knowledge” series, a group of programs that were explicitly intended by HBO as public service. In particular, I analyze after-school specials such as *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story* (1987), *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* (1992), and *Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nicols* (1995), which highlighted ethical responses to the AIDS crisis, teaching people how to accept AIDS patients into their lives.

I also trace the history of these programs against the work of activist video and New Queer Cinema in order to show the way in which some of the tactics of both were co-opted and shaped into more audience-friendly forms in order to make politically engaged
statements about the AIDS epidemic. I highlight programs such as *Voices from the Front* (1992), *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1993) and *Drop Dead Gorgeous: The Power of HIV-Positive Thinking – A Tragicomedy* (1997), the latter of which has never appeared in any scholarly work on AIDS media and is only available thanks to the UCLA Film and Television Archive. These programs operate in very different modes of address but all work to combat perceptions of AIDS at a critical time in the epidemic’s history. Throughout this chapter, I draw upon the work of Steven Epstein, Paula Treichler, Douglas Crimp, and others who have deconstructed AIDS discourse as I discuss how the definition of “activist media” shifts when we take into account conceptions of television and audience.

Chapter six, “Documenting the Treatment and Dramatizing the Virus,” demonstrates the way in which cultural discourse of the AIDS epidemic has changed from the early 1990s to a post-9/11 world. I do this through a textual analysis of four HBO programs. I begin with an analysis of two documentaries, *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know But Were Afraid to Ask* (1987) and *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003). Produced sixteen years apart, these documentaries demonstrate a shift from the “care of the self” to an understanding of AIDS as a global pandemic where non-governmental organizations are the only solution. I analyze *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003) as subscribing to neoliberal logics as four of the five stories in the film take place in countries where the government has failed in some way to provide for those who are suffering from HIV/AIDS. Instead, the film focuses only on free market solutions to the AIDS epidemic. In each of the five national stories in the film, the focus is on individuals and community organizations that work to solve the problem of AIDS, not the role of the state. Finally, I demonstrate that while the film embraces neoliberal
solutions to the problem of AIDS and does not critique the state’s lack of response, the film does offer subtle but explicit critiques of gender inequality in AIDS prevention and treatment. I end this chapter by analyzing HBO’s adaptations of two of the most important works of AIDS literature with the films *And the Band Played On* (1993) and *Angels in America* (2003). I examine these adaptations as demonstrating the shift from the AIDS epidemic as an epidemiological detective story to AIDS as part of the fabric of the American experience in something of a nostalgic look back to a pre-9/11 world. I also contextualize these epic productions within HBO’s larger history of appointment television and their generic and narrative forms.

In the seventh and final chapter, “Popular Culture, Public Service, and Political Activism,” I consider how the examples discussed in this research project suggest the need for a reconsideration of how popular media and political activism may be linked. I provide examples of popular media attempting to act as cultural interventions and consider how spectatorship and activism are blending in interesting and potentially powerful ways as television and other media become increasingly networked and interactive – creating what I have elsewhere called a “cyberactivist spectator.”

In this conclusion, I parse the impact of embracing governmental rationality as a solution rather than encouraging the ethical responses of individuals and collective action to pursue state-centered solutions to the AIDS epidemic and other societal concerns like global poverty and climate change. I end by offering this research project as an example of how reconceptualizing public service television in the post-network era demands a new way of thinking about what public service

looks like in the modern neoliberal state. In doing so this project uncovers potential avenues for popular media, private industry, and individual citizens to be reconfigured within changing definitions of political activism.
If it is true that the best way to understand HBO is through its early history and its relationships with PBS and cable television, we must first consider the history that led us to those points. Before we can set the stage for the birth of HBO, we must understand how the stage itself was constructed. While there are a number of ways to approach the history of television, to have a clear picture of the conjuncture of public service television and cable television, any history must account for shifts in governance, technology, and the general notion of the medium’s purpose.

So what should be this project’s starting point? That question has long been central to the field of television studies. The term television can take on any number of meanings at a given moment, but throughout its history in the United States, it has most often been associated with network television. While it is true that network television (in the sense of commercial, over-the-air broadcasts) was the primary object of study for scholars in the burgeoning field of television studies in the late-1970s and early-1980s, it would be incorrect to assume that network television was an isolated and pure form of television from which we should always begin our analysis or to which we should forever compare other (or newer) configurations of television. We need only take a moment to remember that even in some of the earliest television studies work of Horace Newcomb, Raymond Williams, or John Fiske...
and John Hartley in the mid-1970s, network television and public television were already two different (if not competing) models with which these scholars had to reckon. For scholars, executives, and regulators of the time, network television and public service television were different in terms of content and form, but they also provided very different answers to the following questions: What role should television play in culture, and what economic model should organize broadcast technology? If these two models of television were not enough to demonstrate that television studies did not begin with network television in a pure and isolated form, we then must add the history of cable television to the equation. For example, in 1975, only one year after Raymond Williams wrote *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, HBO was already beaming its programming from an orbital satellite to over 50,000 subscribers in thirty-two markets and would be reaching 4,000,000 subscribers by 1980. These brief examples demonstrate that network television, public television, and cable television have, for a long time, been in a relationship that television studies has had to contend with to some degree. To be sure, contemporary television scholars are not the first to face these complex configurations of this object of study. Importantly, these relationships and concerns go back much further than the early days of television studies in the 1970s, and have, in fact, always been at the foundation of American television.

One of this project’s key arguments is that television is a technology and cultural form that is the result of the very tension between profitability and public service. Soon after the moment of discovery when engineers first harnessed the airwaves, government and

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41 Mair (1988), 33.
private business had to decide how to use them. Along with the invention of television came the standards, regulations, and models defining how the technology would be used (sometimes as guiding notions before the invention phase and sometimes only after the fact). So before examining the crucial period of 1967-1980 (from the establishment of PBS to the cable industry boom) or 1980-1986 (the rise of HBO’s original programming), or 1987-2011 (HBO’s engagement with HIV/AIDS programming), we must first think about the history of television in relation to social, political, and technological contexts along the way. In this examination, there are several questions to consider: What is the role of the state in this technology and cultural form we call “television?” What is the relationship between television and the public? How does television operate within logics of governmentality, and how are these logics intensified when neoliberal free market economic ideology is intertwined with (and often at odds with) a commitment to liberal political ideas of social welfare and the public interest?

In this chapter I begin by sketching the early history of television in the United States through the competing, and often entangled, motivations of profitability and public service. I do this in order to demonstrate that while the important conjuncture of PBS, HBO, and cable television in the 1970s and 1980s is absolutely essential to understanding the state of HBO today, it is not some sublime moment of creation to be considered ahistorically. These two motivations (and, in some form or another, even many of the same technologies) were part of the equation from nearly the birth of television and can be found even earlier in its predecessor – radio.
After reviewing this early history of television’s invention and initial regulation, I explore examples of public service programming found within the “vast wasteland” of the network era before PBS. Finally, I focus on the political and social climate in which public service television became an institutional part of the American television system in the form of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting System. Throughout this history I demonstrate that from television’s beginning this tension between profitability and public service existed and was only further intensified as neoliberalism became the unmistakably dominant economic force from the 1980s to the present.

Private Interests and National Agendas: The Early History of Television

While David Sarnoff is most often credited as the father of medium, television was certainly the brainchild of many people: from Samuel Morse to Lee DeForest and Vladimir Zworykin to Philo T. Farnsworth. As Gary Edgerton writes in his comprehensive history of American television, “Television’s birth involved one-of-a-kind inventors and workaday engineers, farsighted industrialists and bottom-line corporate executives, creative personnel and consumers adventurous to embrace this astonishing new technology and make it their own.”¹⁴² Television as we know it is the product of these individuals on both sides of the production/consumption divide, but as the work of Raymond Williams, Lynn Spigel, James Hay and others have pointed out, television is also the product of a host of cultural,

technological, and economic relationships, not the least of which was the reconfiguration of the post-war economy and its impact on household structure.\textsuperscript{43}

More important than attributing appropriate recognition for who developed what technology, the task of charting the industrial and governmental decisions that went into developing the early American commercial television system is essential to this project’s understanding of the relationship between the goals of private industry and the idea of public airwaves. Thomas Streeter has taken up this line of research and argues that throughout the history of broadcasting, we can see a broad social vision of corporate liberalism and deliberate political activity at work.\textsuperscript{44} My own project argues that this social vision noted by Streeter can be most clearly seen when examining how notions of public service have been configured in radio and television broadcasting over the years.

As is well documented, the history of television is largely a direct result of the history of radio, and, after World War I, the future of radio became an issue of national importance.\textsuperscript{45} As the U.S. government forced British Marconi to sell its American subsidiary to General Electric, the decision to pool radio patents within commercial hands rather than a government entity would be the first of several key steps toward creating the United States’ commercial-based system of radio and television. As Edgerton writes, “After considering and rejecting on philosophical grounds the prospects of establishing a public monopoly, the U.S. Navy

\textsuperscript{43} See Williams (1974); Lynn Spigel, \textit{Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Hay (2000).
created a privately owned trust under the auspices of RCA by pooling all of the wireless patents that it had developed during World War I.”

In a moment when radio could have been treated as a public utility administered in a way that best benefited the citizenry, it was instead treated as a technology to be mined for commercial purposes. Radio became more and more popular in these years as private interests industrialized it. As Michelle Hilmes points out, “Though cautions against monopoly were sounded throughout the [Radio Act of 1927], with so many voices in the airwaves dispersed unevenly about the country, chaos seemed to be a more pressing problem than monopoly.” At this moment, it was more important to have a workable system of assigning radio licenses and developing a radio industry in the U.S. than it was to ensure that there was a level playing field for all interested parties who wished to broadcast over the public airwaves.

Subsequently, radio licenses were distributed in such a way that favored big commercial broadcasters over smaller entities. This was largely the result of the passing of General Order 40 in 1928, which was designed to favor giving licenses to larger commercial stations that could reach more people. This action was seen as being in the public interest as more listeners would presumably prefer the airwaves to be filled with entertaining programming they would enjoy instead of the chatter of pastors, educators, and labor unions. As Hilmes notes,

This distinctly American conception of the public interest, privileging commercial business operations over nonprofit public service, was the exact reverse of the BBC’s

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46 Edgerton (2009), 4.
definition, which considered commercial broadcasters inherently private and thus not able to operate in the service of the public.\textsuperscript{48}

Programming that today would be more traditionally aligned with public service was allocated parts of the spectrum only as long as it did not interfere with popular media and, by extension, interfere with commerce. Just like radio, television would align with private, industrial interests to the point where both media would become fundamentally linked to those interests. As time went on, the words “television” and “radio” would become synonymous with the expression of their most commercialized forms, and the phrase “public service” would continue to change its meaning depending upon the shifts of the political and cultural winds.

With radio having captured the popular imagination and advertising dollars, many industrialists, engineers, and wide-eyed consumers turned to television as the next exciting communicative form. As the most public face of RCA/NBC, David Sarnoff traveled to London in 1937 on a fact-finding mission to learn about the state of television in Great Britain. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) had already been broadcasting to the general public since late-1936 as the centralized (that is, nationalized) British system of planning, and the relatively small land mass allowed for a reliable and fast-tracked infrastructure to be established. Like other American industrialists hungry for a piece of this new television broadcast industry, Sarnoff believed that television in Great Britain and the U.S. would have to differ in two very important ways. First, as the physical size of the U.S. was much larger, the establishment of a nationwide television system in the U.S. required a well-planned distribution method. Secondly, the state-run BBC was not the model of

\textsuperscript{48} Hilmes (2007), 16.
television that Sarnoff believed was correct for the United States. Upon his return to America, Sarnoff told reporters, “I firmly believe in the American system of private enterprise, rather than government subsidy.”¹⁹ Many other interested parties in the broadcast industry, of course, also held this view. As Thomas Streeter and Robert McChesney point out in their studies of early radio and television, these interested parties did all they could to ensure that the airwaves would be privatized, leaving them under the control of corporations rather than the public.⁵⁰

While these important points demonstrate the forces that shaped the industry over the long term (private over public control), the primary reason that American television was continually delayed in the short term was neither ideology nor the sheer distance that television signals would have to travel to reach viewers all across the United States. The issue of standard adoption was largely the major cause for debate among competing companies and thus was the immediate reason for delaying the establishment of a working television system in the United States. As the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) prepared to designate standards for the national television infrastructure, major players like RCA, General Electric, and others wanted to have their own competing system become the standard for transmission in the United States. The lobbying from all sides caused the adoption of a single standard to be continually delayed.

As Edgerton writes, “The FCC had always been subject to all sorts of outside pressures from special interests residing in both the public and private sectors. In the case of

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¹⁹ Edgerton (2009), 5.
television, in particular, the extraordinary amounts of time and money already invested made for an unusually competitive and contentious situation.” 51 Because companies were simultaneously developing different television technologies with sometimes wildly different standards, any decision by the FCC would be seen as favoring some companies over the others, and so “the introduction of TV into American homes was basically put on hold because of the fierce competition that existed in the private sector over which technical standard to approve, coupled with the unwillingness of the FCC to take a controversial stand.” 52 It is clear that because of decisions made by the government, the free-enterprise philosophies of the businessmen in charge of wireless patents, and the economic and regulatory structures in place, the establishment of television in the U.S. took the form of privately owned commercial television networks rather than a national public broadcaster.

Even the very terms of the debate over which standards television would use were the consequence of struggles between corporate interests and public interest. The interests of private enterprises wanting their own proprietary standard to be the universal one were pitted against the interests of the FCC under James Fly, a New Deal liberal who believed that “broadcasters were trustees licensed ‘under mandate to serve the public interest.’” 53 In the end, the way in which these standards were agreed upon were by balancing issues of private interests and government regulation in order to assure that the television spectrum would work properly for the public and not create an unfair advantage to one corporation – again a

51 Edgerton (2009), 8.
52 Ibid., 9.
53 Ibid., 64.
particularly American version of safeguarding the public interest solely by seeking to prevent
the development of a monopolistic industry structure.

Unlike the U.S. model of commercial television, the centralized public service model
allowed Great Britain to launch their television stations much earlier and have a working
system in place while the U.S. was still trying to decide upon a standard that could be
brought to market. Ultimately World War II interrupted these negotiations in the U.S.,
putting the inauguration of commercial television even further on hold. Interestingly enough,
this delay provided direct government and military research into improving the very
technologies upon which television relied. As efforts were directed in ways that would
service the country at wartime, the commercial interests of RCA and others were overridden
and television was postponed.

So while the inventors, businessmen, and regulators all anticipated the arrival of
television, the interests of all parties were guided by ideology and cultural context. As Patrick
Parsons writes,

The introduction of television is a case study in itself of a technology arising from a
given economic and political context and subject to the demands and constraints of
that system. Allowed to proceed only in a vise of conflicting social pressures created
by industrialists on one side and government agencies on the other, it was squeezed
into a negotiated form by powerful vested and combating social actors.\(^{54}\)

By choosing to delay the birth of American television until the end of the war effort, we
could even say that the decision of whether to even \textit{have} television or not at this period was a
negotiation of profitability and public service.

\(^{54}\) Parsons (2008), 39.
The Network Era: Keepers of the Airwaves and our Interests

When we speak of the network era as the golden age of television, we also often tend to simultaneously think of it as a “vast wasteland” in need of correction. Our minds may race to thoughts of sit-coms like *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) or the quiz show scandals of the 1950s – the epitome of what Newton Minow would condemn in his famous speech to the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961. But the network era, like the earliest years and for many years still to come, also had its fair share of programs created with the public interest squarely in mind. It is important to understand that prior to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, network television put a great deal of effort into public service programming, though the enthusiasm for this type of programming (both from the networks and the audiences) certainly had its high and low points.

By examining early examples of network television’s struggles with profitability and public service, we can begin to see that this tension is nothing new and is, in fact, at the core of the American television system. After all, the first sit-com, *Mary Kay and Johnny*, appeared on television on November 18, 1947 with *Meet The Press* premiering only two days later. The medium that could deliver up-to-the-minute news and policy debates into every American home also became a delivery mechanism for entertainment in one of its most popular forms. The medium itself was nothing but potentiality, and its final form has been determined by its uses. Those uses may change over the years, but it is possible to see those shifts largely as the result of television expressing the motivations of either profitability or public service.
Broadcast television programs operating *primarily* in the interest of public service have tended to come in fits and starts. The radio era, even with its privileging of larger commercial stations over small non-profit and educational stations, had periods of renewed interest in public service-oriented programming as programs like *The University of Chicago Round Table* (NBC-Red, 1932) and *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* (NBC-Blue, 1935) brought educational discussions and lectures to the airwaves. Later, during television’s network era, there were similar moments when public service seemed to have resurged and taken over the airwaves from more entertaining fare. For example, when Pat Weaver joined NBC as president, he wished to elevate and educate audiences. He did so by spearheading initiatives like children’s educational shows under the banner of “Enlightenment Through Entertainment” or a group of television documentaries called “telementaries,” which he dubbed “Operation Wisdom.” The similarly named “Operation Frontal Lobes” was an overall grand design for television as both public service and profitable industry.\(^{55}\)

It has been argued that the emphasis on cultural programming was partly in response to a large influx of World War II veterans going to college and finding opportunities to enter a middle-class lifestyle with entrée to the world of so-called cultured tastes. As Edgerton writes, “TV, in turn, stimulated this growing tendency toward cultural eclecticism by the ever-increasing array of programming choices that it offered viewers nationwide during the late 1940s and continuing throughout the 1950s.”\(^{56}\) Despite the early network era’s association with some of the most popular television entertainment of all time, this period was certainly also often the home of educational and cultural programming.

\(^{55}\) Edgerton (2009), 159-160.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 157.
It was during the Kennedy administration’s New Frontier policy initiatives that public service television programming got its biggest shot in the arm yet. From 1961-1962, there was a famously dramatic increase of documentary programming as more than 250 hours of non-fictional programming (some 400 programs) were aired on the three networks. The impetus for this shift is most often attributed to Newton Minow’s “vast wasteland” speech. In his book-length study of network television documentaries during this period, Michael Curtin notes that before this moment, “FCC regulation of television largely had focused on technical and economic issues such as equipment standards, station allocations, and frequency interference. Minow’s first major address after his appointment as chairman marked a significant departure from past practices.” Curtin argues that the focus on public service programming happened at a “distinctive and complicated moment when political and corporate leaders as well as network officials embraced the television documentary in an explicit attempt to mobilize public opinion behind a more activist foreign policy.” At the time, a large segment of the country had a strong isolationist feeling and was not concerned with foreign affairs, so the Kennedy administration faced an uphill battle to “awaken the public to its ‘global responsibilities’ and thereby consolidate popular support for decisive action overseas under the aegis of the New Frontier.” In order to accomplish this, television was thought to be the single best way to engage the public, informing them of the world outside their borders and calling upon them to do their part in the fight against Communism.

57 Michael Curtin, Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 2
59 Ibid., 3.
While not outright nationalist propaganda, these television documentaries were largely supportive of the administration’s overall goals, and, in turn, the efforts of the networks had the administration’s support. These independently produced television documentaries made in the public interest were often designed to provide facts and information to the public so that they could have the knowledge required to participate in the democratic process and keep abreast of foreign affairs. As Curtin notes, these documentaries were meant to “restore the medium’s lost sense of public service and to provide the raw material for enlightened public discussion.” Since they were “linked to specific notions of political process” they could be thought of as prototypes for the type of programming that would later be found on PBS, programs that attempted to cultivate a particular type of rational citizenry. Even if these were not programs designed to indoctrinate viewers and have them toe the line of the Kennedy administration’s anti-Communist policies, they were also certainly not documentaries that would explore the history of Leftist progressive movements around the world, the struggle of labor unions, or the merits of socialism. These were programs that purported to offer facts and widen the view of the American suburban household about the promises and threats of an increasingly globalized world.

It is important to note that despite the rhetoric of Newton Minow and the tremendous amount of support that networks gave the Kennedy administration, these initiatives to provide more public-service programming were still well within a commercial system of television. It was not as if any one person or administration could suddenly flip a switch and completely reorient the goals of television broadcasting. After his initial speech to

60 Ibid., 32.
broadcasters, Minow still had opposition from the networks so he “shifted his efforts from a broad critique of television to the promotion of particular kinds of programs.” He toned down his rhetoric and pivoted from a broad call to overhaul television toward the public interest to the promotion of specific types of programs like television documentaries, which were still within the realm of the networks’ economic interests.

Networks were not the only opposition to overcome, as audiences were generally quite happy with the programming already on television. The majority of Americans saw the entertaining fare that filled most of the network television schedule as what television was all about. Even though some 90% of American households watched at least one television documentary during this period, the audiences for more typical entertainment easily eclipsed the numbers who watched cultural programming. For example, one out of three Americans still regularly watched *The Beverly Hillbillies* in 1962, and the number of viewers for documentaries was miniscule in comparison to the viewership of this single sit-com. Just because the administration pushed for cultural programming and the networks eventually largely followed suit, it doesn’t mean that the public wanted to watch. As Curtin writes,

> This ambivalence among viewers caused internal struggles within the networks, where news executives were pressed to justify these shows according to the commercial logic of television. The programs consistently underperformed when compared with the audience ratings for other prime-time genres… [It] was difficult for news executives to sustain the programs within the context of a commercial entertainment medium.

While these problems would be later alleviated with the introduction of PBS as a separate channel for public service programming, the competing logics of entertainment programming

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61 Ibid., 2.
62 Ibid., 9.
(i.e. profitable programming) and public service programming were battling it out within the major television networks. As we’ve seen, where operating in the public interest once meant providing “a diverse menu of programming,” during this period it meant increasing the number and scope of television news coverage through documentaries that offered “analysis of international issues, specifically the global threat of monolithic Communism.”^63 This is yet another example of how easily the notion of public service programming shifted to fit the times.

Of course, television documentaries about international affairs were not the only public service-oriented programs on network schedules. There were programs that attempted to blend popular forms with educational, historical, and cultural content. Probably the best example of television’s attempt to create educational and cultural programming during the network era is the *Omnibus* series, the brainchild of Robert Saudek, former vice-president of ABC public affairs. Hosted by Alistair Cooke, *Omnibus* was a mixture of highbrow and middlebrow programming offering “everything from figure skating to a Gertrude Stein play, from a profile of Harpo Marx to Antigone.”^64 *Omnibus* aired on CBS from 1952-1958 and in its final season moved from Sunday afternoons to Sunday evenings on ABC before being eventually programmed from time to time on NBC until 1961.

That *Omnibus* jumped from network to network trying to find a home should not come as such a surprise when one considers just how different it was from much of what was regularly available on television at the time. With a three million dollar grant from the Ford Foundation, *Omnibus* “linked pedagogy with showmanship to produce a series of visual

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^63 Ibid., 34.
^64 Ledbetter (1997), 41.
lectures that became a model for public television.” Soon, though, the Ford Foundation questioned the commitment of network television to public interest programming. It is after this attempt at underwriting cultural programming that the Ford Foundation began producing programming for National Education Television in what would become the precursor to PBS.

Public Service Television Finds Its Permanent Home

National Education Television (NET) was established in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1954 in the midst of a commercial television system that undeniably privileged entertainment over educational programming. Of course, educational programming dates back at least to the radio era, as universities were given part of the FM spectrum for this purpose, but with the shift to television, the addition of images did not do much to change the content. Programs were largely a mixture of lectures from local professors or programs distributed to universities; they only aired a few hours a week, and they never amassed a large audience. With the Ford Foundation as its main source of funding, NET attempted to provide educational programming that would save the masses from the entertainment-oriented offerings of network television.

After failing to achieve the desired results with its support of Omnibus, the Ford Foundation eventually left the world of commercial networks altogether to create this public service television alternative. Moving away from the “edutainment” approach of Omnibus, NET programming did not pretend to be entertainment. Unlike PBS’s later attempts to appeal to children by combining educational content with popular aesthetics, NET programs

“valorized the sophisticated, college-educated, intellectually oriented, implicitly white minority who protested television’s cultural mediocrity while engaging its upwardly mobile aspirants in a pedagogic and frequently disciplinary relationship.” Because of this mode of address, NET’s programming did little to draw large audiences away from the sit-coms and variety shows that filled the schedules of network television. NET programs were also not as slickly produced as the network television documentaries that would gain sizable audiences during the Kennedy years. It is during this moment, however, that interest groups, consumer advocates, and government officials called for the creation of a dedicated public television channel to provide a type of educational programming that would not be relegated to the world of universities.

It was also at this moment that technologies became available that would increase the number of channels available to households. The stage was now set for a publicly funded television alternative, but this would not represent a radical shift in the television landscape. As Laurie Ouellette notes, public television in this form was “a complementary supplement to the dominant commercial broadcasting system, not a fundamentally different way of organizing television culture.” As is clearly visible with the approach eventually taken by Newton Minow, reorienting American television toward public service programming was done within the parameters of the commercial system already in place. With that being the case, public television found a nice fit sandwiched between the commercial networks, competing for viewers but having the benefit of not having to worry much about ratings.

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66 Ouellette (2002), 45.
67 Ibid., 50.
Following the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television and their 1967 report, *Public Television: A Program For Action*, legislation was shaped that would create the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).\(^{68}\) Established on November 7, 1967, the goal of the CPB was to create informational programming that would appeal to higher-level sensibilities and cultivate an audience that would be an informed and rational citizenry. Two years later, the Public Broadcasting Service was born. Known today for programs like *American Experience*, *Masterpiece*, *Frontline*, and *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS has become synonymous with not only a particular programming style but also a certain intellectual sensibility.

While support and viewership numbers have remained relatively low since its inception, PBS has always been seen to offer a type of programming that was unavailable on network television’s “vast wasteland” of situation comedy, melodrama, and game shows. As is illustrated by Edward R. Murrow’s *See It Now* famously losing its time slot to *The $64,000 Question*, in the world of network television, entertainment often won the day. Faced with the choice between backing a hit program versus an informative documentary or public debate roundtable, the choice was often clear. For one of many striking examples of this logic at work we can remember that Fred Friendly left his post as President of CBS News in 1966 when CBS decided to broadcast an *I Love Lucy* rerun instead of Vietnam War Senate Hearings.\(^{69}\) In a sense, PBS was created because market culture was deemed inadequate, as the television networks were not creating enough programming that cultivated civic

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\(^{69}\) Ouellette (2002), 111.
democracy and an informed populace. At one time, the sense of PBS’s mandate was encapsulated in a very telling tagline: “If PBS doesn’t do it, who will?”

Unlike the Kennedy administration’s goals of increasing awareness and support of U.S. foreign policy through network television documentaries, PBS was part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program. The mission of PBS was therefore multifaceted. Meant to be a corrective to network television, PBS was to offer higher-minded, cultural programming such as filmed theater and historical documentaries that were largely absent on network television as well as provide educational programming for children. In part, the idea was to give the public educational programming, political debate, and programming that would contribute to democratic civility – a far cry from the game shows and sit-coms that were commonly thought of as nothing but a way to use network television to sell toothbrushes to the masses.

Despite its entrance into the television game, PBS was not seen as a threat to the major networks; in fact, the networks were quite supportive of PBS. CBS, for example, donated one million dollars to PBS in its first year. Why would the networks want to create a competing network? Laurie Ouellette argues that PBS was designed to manage the TV problem by resolving its weaknesses and contradictions and not to completely rethink the private commercial foundations of U.S. broadcasting. She writes, “Within the established parameters of corporate liberal ideology, public-private intervention designed to correct the perceived cultural- and public-interest shortcomings of free enterprise in the domain of broadcasting made perfect sense.”\textsuperscript{70} By supporting a network devoted to cultural and

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 50.
educational programming, the commercial networks would be able to continue broadcasting their entertainment programming and deflect criticisms that they were not living up to their task as guardians of the public interest. Of course, this is, as we’ve seen, a particularly American configuration of broadcast television. As television in the U.S. could have taken on any number of configurations, one that would have mimicked the British model and had a national plan for public service television could have meant a radically different trajectory for American television. This is not to say that after the initial development of television, the train was sent down the track and was unable to alter its path. One of several plans put forth in 1967 by the Carnegie Commission was to propose a 2% excise tax on televisions, but this was shot down and never made it to the final congressional bill. Conservatives could not support this proposal, as they did not want to fund what they saw as programming for the elite on the backs of the masses, going so far as to calling it a culture tax.71

Many have argued that the ultimate financial structure chosen for PBS, partially funded with federal dollars and partially reliant on corporate and philanthropic underwriting, puts public television in the United States in a very difficult position. With the configuration of the CPB that was finally developed, the independence of PBS is often limited by its funding mechanisms. By not having a dedicated and permanent source and amount of federal funding and by having its purse strings tied to the whims of the current Presidential administration and Congress, PBS lacks the ability to be fully autonomous from political pressure. PBS’s programming has famously come under attack at various times by those in charge of its budgets. For example, programming that was thought to be critical of the sitting

Nixon administration got PBS in trouble, and PBS subsequently faced budgetary difficulties as the administration began a fierce critique of PBS based on its supposed liberal bias, promotion of cultural elitism, and poor use of taxpayer money.

The assault against PBS only intensified during the Reagan administration and finally came to a head in the early 1990s as Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and key Republicans such as Jesse Helms of North Carolina worked to de-fund the National Endowment for the Arts and attempted to privatize PBS. The increasing difficulties for PBS can be clearly seen by looking at the numbers. As Laurie Ouellette notes, PBS could hardly be called public if by 1995 only 14% of PBS’s budget came from the federal government, and by 1999 this number had dropped to 11.6%. Nations with a more robust commitment to public television provide funding that dwarfs what the U.S. provides. For example, in 1993 Japan spent $32.02 per citizen on public television, Canada spent $31.05, and Great Britain spent $38.99. The U.S. federal government, on the other hand, spent only $1.09 per citizen for public broadcasting.

The funding debates that informed the creation and structure of PBS continue to this day. More recently, one of the main arguments for the government letting the free market take care of PBS is the fact that by the 1980s and early 1990s, cable television had created a TV lineup that offered niche programming that in many ways mimicked the output of PBS but did so without the aid of government funding. Cable outlets like The Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel offered informational and educational documentaries that often directly competed with PBS and typically had much larger budgets. Bravo and Arts &

72 Ibid., 6.
73 Ledbetter (1997), 4.
Entertainment offered long-form documentaries that profiled artists, musicians, and filmmakers, films that would not typically air on network television but would have often found a home on PBS. Nickelodeon (created in 1979 as Pinwheel and later renamed in 1981) was originally a commercial-free channel for children’s educational and entertainment programming whose daily schedule lasted far longer than the early morning and afternoon children’s programming blocks offered by PBS.  

In light of these basic cable channels (and, as we will soon see, premium channels including HBO) increasing their production of informational and educational programming, the residual need for PBS became, for many critics, largely one of economics and access. According to the philosophy of many who supported PBS, those in the lower class who were most in need of this type of programming simply did not have access to cable television. This is made clear in an editorial that appeared in *The Washington Post* on November 21, 1980:

> Competition from cable television is taking its toll on public broadcasting. Corporations as well as the established commercial networks can play to specialized groups quite profitably on cable as well as on videocassette and discs. For example, a big firm that may have been underwriting a public television program might now prefer to team up with a commercial network for the exclusive cable rights to all symphony concerts in a city, or all basketball games. If so, wouldn’t this accomplish what public broadcasting was established to do? For viewers who can pay for it, yes; but a significant aspect of public television – worth preserving – is the open public access it offers to cultural and other special programming. To that end, public television can, and should, seize upon the new technologies to generate new sources of money.

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75 Quoted in *Cablevision*, December 22, 1980, 58.
In the *New York Daily News* (January 7, 1981), Richard Reeves similarly laments the albatross of public television and believes that unless PBS makes use of new technologies that the market has provided, it will be a dinosaur in the new age. He writes,

> Public television has done some marvelous things over the years. It still does. But it is a collection of bloated, slow moving, cautious bureaucracies that got itself caught in the worst of all worlds, being dependent for funding, for survival, on both government and big business. Now, with the growth of cable television and existing satellite transmission capability, the “television revolution” is here. Entrepreneurs are figuring out ways to make money doing what public television was supposed to be doing and sometimes did: provide public affairs, cultural and educational programming for minority audiences, audiences too small or specialized to tempt commercial television. That leaves damn little room for public television unless it can do the same things as commercial television, and at least as well.76

Quite simply, much of the consensus was that programming was best left in the hands of the market, and the only reason for the government to maintain its funding of public broadcasting was as a welfare service for the underprivileged. Even this reasoning was considered suspect as many detractors claimed that PBS was actually just subsidizing programming for the “East coast liberal elite.”

While debates raged in the halls of Washington and on the editorial pages of newspapers, the argument echoed just as loudly in the cable industry trade journals. With all of these new cable channels appearing, cable providers wondered whether or not there was a tipping point when adding them to their cable lineup. How many would be too many? Which ones would draw the most viewers? How many non-commercial channels like Nickelodeon

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76 Quoted in *Cablevision*, January 26, 1981, 66.
should cable providers subsidize? Where was the fine line where profit and public service could co-exist?

Of course, during this rise of cable alternatives and under the threat of losing their funding, PBS was even more concerned about its own fate. In a speech delivered at a broadcasters meeting in Houston in late 1980, Larry Grossman, the president of PBS, delivered harsh words to these cable upstarts. According to *Cablevision* columnist Barbara Ruger,

Larry Grossman… takes some cheap shots at the public sector moving through cable into what Grossman sees as “our market; a market that we developed and that is dedicated to us.” No one, even public broadcasting, has an exclusive franchise on that market. And for Grossman to attack those trying to increase the amount of quality programming available to the American public, the very idea on which PBS was founded, is rather surprising. If PBS believes in the principles of quality programming, it should be gracious enough to support all efforts aimed at that end… No one is claiming these ventures will be an unmitigated success. But is it appropriate for the president of PBS to castigate these companies for putting big dollars into expanding the availability of PBS-like services? In making his case for the survival of public broadcasting, Grossman says, “We shall always have a preeminent need for a service that stands for quality, that serves as a model of excellence and that represents the very best that our civilization has to offer.” What Grossman is suggesting, however, is that only PBS is capable of delivering that type of service. PBS’s often-criticized elitist attitude comes through in Grossman’s evaluation of cable’s plans.

As Ruger’s extended commentary points out, with the field wide open, cable channels had every right to tap the market that PBS had created. Many of these new cable channels saw informational and cultural programming not as a public service but simply as a way to reach

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77 The pages of trade journals during the early 1980s were full of advertisements by Nickelodeon, promoting its channel as a public service that the cable provider could offer. The advertising copy read: “For ten cents you can be a hero in the community.” Providers who offered Nickelodeon to their subscribers were positioned as those who “know the goodwill of their customers, the support of their community, and the well-being of their children are worth a lot more than ten cents a subscriber. It makes you look good. And it makes a great investment too.” *Cablevision*, December 1, 1980, 53.

niche markets by offering what network television could or would not. They felt they were just as capable (and even more so) of producing important cultural programming within their business model as profit-oriented program providers – especially since much of this cultural programming was far cheaper than producing bigger-budget dramatic programming.

Despite their differing ideologies and rationales (profitability or public service), the programming on these cable channels was relatively similar and their basic mission was often the same: to act as a corrective to the programming of network television. As Laurie Ouellette writes,

> Today, cable and satellite channels – Arts & Entertainment, Bravo, CNN, Discovery Channel, Learning Channel, Home and Garden, MSNBC, HBO, Lifetime – all claim to serve “selective” viewers with “specialized” television programming that is said to be a “cut above” mass culture. With profits in mind, these commercial venues compete for the same predominately white, upper-middle-class viewers that public television has courted through its “excellent” and “diverse” programming priorities.79

While it is true that these channels operate as specific niche markets that narrowcast to a particular type of viewer while offering commercials for products suited to those demographics, the one network that stands out in her lineup is HBO. Unlike the other cable networks listed, HBO is a non-commercial, subscription-based, premium channel and therefore has always operated under different parameters than the others. It is not reliant on commercial advertising and is focused instead on providing programming for its subscriber base. As we will soon see, this important difference helped to create programming that would not be found on any of these other cable networks and would further set it apart.

So, from this brief look at the early years of PBS in the late 1960s, it’s clear that while this was an important moment in the history of television, it is not as if after years of

79 Ouellette (2002), 220.
network television’s failures, American television viewers suddenly decided that there needed to be public service channels as well. Public service was always a part of American television. It is just that at this moment in 1967, public television became federally funded (in part) and had its structure put in place by law. At the same time, the boom years of the cable television industry offered new technologies and business models that generated increasing numbers of channels with many more programming options. As a business, cable television was in the game to make money, but given the cultural climate, wrapping itself in the virtues of its ability to offer a public service to consumers (more choice! better programming!) was a tactic that worked. It was, of course, nothing new, but it was certainly in line with American notions of “public service” and “public interest” that blanketed discussion of radio and television in previous years and would be trumpeted from the mouthpieces of cable giants for years to come.

**Cable Television: Awaking The (Bumbling) Sleeping Giant**

So by looking at the establishment of the commercial television industry in the U.S., and of PBS, one can see that television was, from the very beginning, mired in debates over public funding at the very moment that television was taking a new shape. At the same time that PBS was finding its footing, cable television was on the rise and was about to greatly increase the number of channels available to the American public. After important deregulatory measures were implemented, cable companies began to grow at an impressive rate, and subscription numbers grew exponentially. More people now had access to cable
television, and while the number of channels was initially small (8-10 if you were lucky), it did not take long for consumers to get to 20, 40, or even 100 channels.

Without diving too far into the earliest history of what might be considered proto-cable television, it is worth pointing out that as soon as television networks began broadcasting to a wide consumer base in the late 1940s and early 1950s, cable television was already becoming popular – albeit in a different form than we know today. At the same time as the earliest stations were beaming their broadcasts to the public, the public was preparing to receive them by buying televisions and making sure they were in broadcast range. Those households out of the range of the television signal (or so far on the outskirts that their signals were weak) were out of luck for over-the-air broadcasts. It is here that we can see the first wide uses of community antenna television (CATV). In its infancy, CATV was mostly in place only at outer regions, but it soon became common within urban areas as well. While signal boosters brought network television from metropolitan areas to mountain antennas and valley towns, urban rooftop antennas and wires brought signals to individual apartments (a practice sometimes still in use even today).

Often, these systems were integrated into existing communication systems as, for example, when television signals were piggybacked onto the phone line cables that AT&T was already running. As Patrick Parsons notes,

The technical ability to capture, amplify, and distribute TV signals moved to increasingly higher levels of sophistication as the systems advanced from store-front windows to apartment buildings to villages and towns. All of which is to underscore the notion that cable television was a technology that was not, in any meaningful way, “invented.” Rather, it was a logical extension of both concepts and equipment in existence at the time. They were the incremental steps of the evolutionary process. CATV invoked and modified older technology to meet a new need, drawing
especially on the early television “boosters” and the apartment TV master antenna systems of the day. 80

This is all to say that cable television initially was, in many ways, simply an alternative delivery system for the content broadcast by the networks. What we call “cable television” today is often meant to be a way to distinguish content (basic or premium cable channels from networks), but that distinction in colloquial discussions of cable television programming should not obscure the early history of the technology.

As we will later see, it is true that at the moment of the cable television boom in the late 1970s, new cable networks like HBO wrapped themselves in that distinctive language of cable television, but they only existed because of technology that was initially intended to relay over-the-air broadcasts of network television stations to household sets via signal boosters and cable wires. In fact, HBO’s very first transmission in 1972 was via one of these already-existing CATV stations in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. This technology, of course, grew to include the possibility of more channels and the ability to charge customers for access to this additional content, but it’s important to remember that the television itself, whether via wires or airwaves, had long looked to increase its bandwidth so that the number of available channels could increase. Even the very idea of providing more channels was often cast in the light of doing so in the public interest (in the broadly commercial sense of the term as well as in the more strict sense of providing public service and public access television once more bandwidth became available). So while we might now draw a clear distinction between network television, public television, and cable television, it should be clear that these forms were not always so separate.

80 Parsons (2008), 56.
While the technology and content of cable television was and is in many ways inextricably linked to network television, the discourse from and about cable television did all it could to distinguish itself from its over-the-air counterpart. At the same time that this discourse helped the cable industry to grow, it also created a desire on the part of the FCC to limit that growth and protect local television stations from cable’s encroachment. From the inception of CATV, the FCC imposed heavy regulations on the CATV industry to make sure that local broadcast stations were protected. The idea was to ensure that a cable service couldn’t bring in a network signal from elsewhere and put a local television station out of business. When the cable industry was made up of mom-and-pop businesses and loose associations, it was no match to fight this regulation, but as the industry grew and the power of conglomerates began to throw around their weight, much of the heaviest regulation began to ease up by the mid-1970s.

In addition to deregulation, advances in microwave and satellite technology allowed cable to take off in unprecedented ways. The first commercial television satellite, Telstar 1, went up into orbit in 1962, but only the major networks had taken advantage of it. In 1975 HBO was the first cable channel to bounce its signal off the satellite, inaugurating the great space race for cable. Soon, TBS and WGN moved from being local or regional stations to become national superstations via satellite transmission, and then even the major networks got in on the game and flirted with creating cable television channels such as CBS Cable. After fielding so much criticism for filling the airwaves with mindless entertainment, the networks took this opportunity to try on a new persona. Some of the networks’ initial cable
offerings were cultural programs like ballet, artist biographies, or theater, though none of them were very successful.\textsuperscript{81}

Even though cable television had been around for a long time – just as long as broadcast television itself – it wasn’t until this moment in the 1970s of deregulation, technological advance, and corporate conglomeration that the cable industry experienced tremendous growth and began to supplant over-the-air broadcasts as the primary way that Americans received their television signals. Due to this explosive growth, everyone, including the government, was watching the cable industry carefully. Because they were squarely in the limelight, cable providers often had to sell themselves, not as upstarts, but as providers of quality entertainment – even sometimes as public servants. With the cable industry’s ability to provide countless new channels and programs of all types came the threat to the already shaky ground upon which American public television stood. In the end, it was to the cable industry that PBS would eventually look in order to find a way to maintain relevancy in this ever-expanding post-network environment.

In light of the continuing encroachment on PBS’s domain by cable television stations over the years, PBS set out to reinvent itself at the turn of the new millennium. By the year 2000, PBS was experiencing a drop in viewer donations, declining revenue from corporate underwriting, and even bigger public funding cuts. Under the new leadership of Pat Mitchell (former CNN executive and head of Time Inc. Television), PBS utilized what Laurie Ouellette has called a two-pronged approach. It became more entrepreneurial and

competitive, and it updated its public service mission for the digital era to justify new public and philanthropic funding.\textsuperscript{82}

In an era of intensified neoliberalism, a more privatized approach to public service television was implemented to transform PBS into a more compelling option for corporate sponsors and television viewers. The goal for PBS was to create public service programming while also staying afloat financially – what Pat Mitchell has described as “doing good while doing well.”\textsuperscript{83} Drawing upon the success of cable television strategies, PBS now has programming blocks like history night, science night, public affairs night to add sequencing and flow to their programming in order to retain viewers and get higher ratings. In turn, this makes the programming more attractive to corporate underwriting as viewers might stick around for more than one program each night. PBS has expended their lineup to now be a multi-channel PBS with PBS World, PBS Create, and PBS Kids. In other words, the logics of cable came to the rescue for PBS.

It is clear that the configuration of network television, public service television, and cable television is not simply an additive or linear one. Public service television was always a part of television whether as the dominant model as in the British system or a more implicit structural concern as in the American system where it was at least part of the mission of television networks who were granted use of the public airwaves. It was only later between 1967 and 1969, that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting System were established as a specific type of public service television made to be a


\textsuperscript{83} Ouellette (2009), 183
corrective of the perceived failures of U.S. network television. This failure was, in a sense, a failure to perform the mission of public service that it was supposed to be doing all along.

In the same way that public service television is not simply a product of liberal initiatives in the 1960s, cable television is not just something created in the 1970s and 1980s and added to the television models that were available. Cable television has been around in one form or another since nearly the beginning of television itself and really began to take hold as early as the 1950s. Originally conceived as community antenna television (CATV), it was considered a passive antenna technology that allowed subscribers without access to good-quality broadcasts to be able to receive television service. Understood as a technological object and not an activity or service, CATV managed to avoid rulings and regulations from the FCC in terms of copyright, common carrier laws, etc. that would have hindered its explosive growth.\textsuperscript{84} It was only after 1965, when discourse and legislation about CATV began to consider it a service rather than an object, that CATV became regulated in such a way that gave us the beginnings of the cable television system that we recognize today as “cable TV.” This new understanding of cable television was part of a cultural discourse about the possibilities of communication technologies (particularly through cable rather than over-the-air transmission) to change the way we receive information or perform tasks such as shopping and banking.

The history of cable television is filled with promises of advance and failures of experimentation. Shifts in regulation along with advances in technology such as smaller satellites and dishes and fiber optic connectivity have increased the programming options for

\textsuperscript{84} See Parsons (2008).
consumers and reduced costs for providers to the point where cable television had become nearly as ubiquitous as free, over-the-air broadcasts – becoming the dominant transmission method for television signals to reach homes (despite the ever-increasing costs to consumers). It was through this arrangement of improved technologies, weak governmental regulation, consumer demand for more channels, and the lofty promises of the cable industry that HBO, a small cable channel in Manhattan, would grow to become one of the biggest companies in the history of television and provide some of the most profitable, popular, and critically acclaimed programming to enter the nation’s living rooms.
Chapter 3
“Finding the Magic Recipe:” Rethinking the History of HBO

At the tail end of the network era, PBS seemed to bear the public service burden for all of television. This was, of course, a welcome relief to the networks who could now pursue the highest possible ratings with entertainment programming and not worry as much about public service-oriented programming. For the champions of educational and public affairs television at PBS this burden was something of a badge of honor, and the sense of PBS’s mandate was encapsulated in its tagline: “If PBS doesn’t do it, who will?” As the previous chapter noted, by the early 1980s cable television executives began to reject PBS’s claim of being the last bastion of quality programming on television. Much earlier, though, on November 8, 1972, only three years after PBS was established, HBO broadcast its first cable transmission, and in just ten short years HBO began to think of itself as one possible answer to the question: “If PBS doesn’t do it, who will?”

Born in the wake of a tremendous upsurge in discourse about public service television, it should come as no surprise that HBO would be informed by this trend. Avi Santo writes, “As a premium network born into an era that stressed cable’s utopian potential for diversity and public service, HBO’s programming choices have, in part, been influenced by a public service model of television.”

While this assertion is absolutely true, public service programming is rarely what one thinks of when considering HBO. Additionally, this “utopian potential for diversity” and the idea of “public service,” was certainly not something

that seems to have been guiding the business decisions and programming choices of HBO during the first few years of the cable channel’s existence.

While there were occasional “cultural” programs in those early years, they were not part of any coherent strategy to provide quality public service entertainment. As this chapter will make clear, cultural programs were often simply seen as cheap (or free) programming that filled the hours of a precariously thin schedule. It took a fair amount of time for HBO to actively explore what one might consider public service programming, and it was not a simple and direct path from programming a few hours of sports and second-rate movies each day to creating original programming that garnered unmatched critical acclaim. Though HBO was not established with the intention of creating a channel filled with important cultural programming, it became what is arguably the broadest mainstream outlet for documentary film and queer representation on television to date. We will see this process begin in HBO’s early history when, during the late-1980s and early-1990s, HBO became a key producer and distributor of AIDS media. These HIV/AIDS programs demonstrated a level of sophistication and license to explore the complexity of AIDS that was almost entirely absent elsewhere on television. The journey between these two points is complex, and nothing close to a sufficient history of these shifts in HBO’s programming has yet been written. Once written, this history will explain a great deal about how HBO became what it is today.

While recent years have seen studies of HBO reach a fever pitch, this work is, more often than not, focused on the most recent critically acclaimed series such as The Sopranos, The Wire, Deadwood (2004-2006), or True Blood (2008-present). Two edited collections, The Essential HBO Reader and It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era,
published just months apart in 2008 worked to shift studies of HBO from textual analyses of individual programs to a wider examination of the cable channel itself. The essays in these collections work to better situate individual programs, or genres of programs, within a broader industrial perspective, taking into account cultural and industrial context and the discourse of quality and auteurism that is often attributed to HBO. By the very nature of being edited collections, though, these two books are necessarily limited in scope – using only the space in the introductory chapter to offer what both call a brief history of HBO. Each essay in these volumes examines a program like *Sex and the City* or a group of programs like the *America Undercover* series and provides interesting and insightful readings from a variety of perspectives. The approach of these edited collections is a valuable addition to the study of HBO, but in light of HBO’s nearly forty-year history, they can be seen as important first steps toward a more complete understanding of the cable network.

Twenty years earlier, in 1988, George Mair, a former Chief Public Relations counsel for HBO, published the only book-length study to date that attempts to act as a comprehensive chronicle of HBO. As a journalist, Mair’s book, *Inside HBO: The Billion Dollar War Between HBO, Hollywood, and the Home Video Revolution*, is written as a popular history oriented toward readers interested in business success stories. While an entertaining read, and certainly a perspective on the company that provides a glimpse inside HBO’s volatile corporate structure in the early years, the book’s publication date limits Mair’s account to the time before what is arguably HBO’s most profound cultural impact. Additionally, given the business-oriented audience, Mair’s appraisal of HBO’s success relies heavily on a notion of entrepreneurship and the value of shrewd business tactics. He writes,
for example, “The success of HBO is one of the great, untold business stories of the last
decade. Its fabulous success is due to a handful of smart men and women at HBO, a lot of
stupidity by its competition, and some good old-fashioned luck.” Quips like this, along with
the lack of citations for many of Mair’s statistics, make this book interesting but less than
ideal as the basis for a comprehensive historical study of HBO.

Despite its shortcomings, Mair’s book has been the go-to source for scholars who are
looking to write a quick overview of HBO’s formative years in order to preface their own
work on more recent HBO programs. As an relevant example of how this single source of
HBO’s early history has been used in recent studies of HBO, in the introduction to It’s Not
TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Network Television Era, the editors cite Mair’s book as they
write what they call “an extremely brief (but necessary) history of HBO.” While discussing
the first-ever broadcast on HBO on November 8, 1972, a hockey game, they write,
“According to legend, the game was followed by the airing of the first film to be screened on
HBO.” After this many years of academics studying HBO, we should not have to rely on
legend when enough research can bring us to verifiable fact – especially when it concerns a
date of landmark importance in the history of HBO.

While this dissertation is in conversation with these accounts of HBO and, of course,
the many books, chapters, and articles that have given thought to the network while
examining particular HBO series, this project’s approach relies on a broader set of primary

87 This is seen in both of these edited collections as well as individual studies. See, for example,
88 Leverette, Ott, & Buckley (2008), 2.
HBO Comes of Age in an Era of Cable Growth and Deregulation

Part of the reason that it has been easy for scholars to limit their studies to a “brief but necessary early history of HBO” is that on the surface, HBO’s first decade can largely be seen as the work of a select few savvy individuals battling Hollywood, the FCC, and other cable channels. This is because without many readily available primary documents about that early period, stories and hearsay become legend and eventually fact, and corporate histories wind up being left to tell-alls for the business set. For scholars writing from today, it has been easy to gloss over HBO’s growth from 1972-1992 in a few simple sentences about the “trial and error” that went on until the executives found what worked – stopping along the way to note HBO broadcast the “Thrilla in Manilla” in 1975 or that HBO aired the first made-for-pay-TV movie, The Terry Fox Story, in 1983. Of course, this dissertation does not claim to be an exhaustive history of the corporation from its establishment to today (though studies of that sort are surely needed). Given the scope of this project, when it comes to HBO in the years between 1973 and 1979, I will regrettably also have to be somewhat brief. As this dissertation is primarily concerned with HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming, the first of which
appeared in 1987, the bulk of my analysis is inevitably limited to the period from 1987 to today. On the other hand, in order to fully explain those and other socially committed or public service programs, it is important to contextualize them within the important shifts that began in HBO programming between 1979-1986.

It was in 1979 that HBO began to make a concerted effort to expand the network’s original programming. This was largely because HBO needed to fill its programming schedule, and Hollywood was not always willing to provide films. Not only were film studios reluctant to partner with a cable company they saw as direct competition, there were also simply not enough Hollywood films or sporting events created each year to fill HBO’s schedule, especially after HBO began programming twenty-four hours a day in 1982. As we will see, drawing upon Time Inc.’s magazine holdings was something of a natural move for HBO to make when looking for original programming. We will also see how the mode of address that HBO chose to use, and the way that HBO went about creating and marketing that programming, would draw upon a sensibility – and sense of self-importance – that a television viewer would more likely find on PBS than on any other network or basic cable television channel.

If these early years are so often summarized as a period of trial and error, what is important for this project is to analyze how these early years of successes and failures are informed, in part, by changes in the cable industry, new technologies, governmental regulation and deregulation, and the discourse of cable television’s potential to change the world. Of course, the world itself was changing with and without the help of cable television, and it is essential to note the cultural changes that came along with economic and industrial
ones. It is with this in mind that the growth of the cable industry during these years cannot be fully understood without factoring in the decisions made by the FCC, Congress, and the Reagan administration. Throughout the history of cable television, the relationship between the federal government and the cable industry has not simply been one of alternating opposition and collaboration. The relationship is a much deeper one of governance and strategy – one where society is at the same time represented in and shaped by the media industries. It is a one where media industries and government rely on and help to create the technologies that shape the world in which we live. The terms of this relationship are often played out in the pages of *Cablevision*, the largest and most important trade journal for the cable industry, and a closer look at this relationship tells us a great deal about why HBO’s success was both admired and feared during these years.

At the industrial level, in explaining the path that HBO’s growth took, it is important to not simply take for granted that HBO’s position remained constant and that strategies in place today were always at work. We cannot simply work backwards from HBO’s current industrial prominence and business practices to see how the cable channel got there. HBO’s history should not be seen as a teleological one where early periods of trial and error were inevitable steps toward getting us to the current (and most advanced) state. Rather than only focusing only on the successes, it is useful to examine what has been perceived as missteps and failures – though, of course, such labels presuppose a deterministic view. Rather than rely on such a view, we can perform what Rick Altman has called “crisis historiography” in order to see how HBO’s choices provide clues as to what informed those decisions along the way.
Altman’s method of crisis historiography allows us to avoid the mistake of taking for granted what we perceive as natural and constant with communication technologies such as cinema and television. For our purposes, this is particularly useful as HBO makes use of media convergence in ways that make it impossible to think of HBO simply as one premium channel on a cable television lineup (and as the previous chapter pointed out, “cable television” is itself a shifting term). HBO has long been at the vanguard of new technologies and distribution methods in ways that make strict categorization and clear antecedents difficult to paint with broad strokes. Born at the forefront of the cable boom and the first cable network to use satellite technology, HBO has continued to explore new technologies and distribution methods with home video and DVD distribution, high definition broadcasts, streaming subscription content online, and offering a la carte catalog programs and free podcasts through Apple’s iTunes Store. HBO’s path has not been singular, and as we will see in detail, its growth, development, and market dominance were not always certain.

Utilizing crisis historiography we can explore the discourse surrounding HBO’s decisions to see what informed them and how HBO was not necessarily breaking new ground but rather building upon what was available to them at the time. Altman points us in a useful methodological direction as he writes,

By starting with a phenomenon as defined today – by hiding the fact that the terminology currently applied to the object of study was at an earlier point used quite differently – historians beg major questions about what they are actually analyzing. In short, the assumption of a single stable object of study hides the very problem that history is designed to study and explain.  

89 Rick Altman, Silent Film Sound (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 15.
For Altman, it is important that we understand, for example, that a technology we call television was not always called such, and very likely could have been (and was actually at times) thought of as a radio with pictures – informed by the discourse of radio as much as it was by the discourse of cinema. It is with this in mind that we must treat HBO as a series of experiments and calculated risks and not simply the masterful insight of its executives. We must also treat HBO as more than a cable channel. HBO must be understood as a business model, corporate subsidiary, program distributor, and producer of media texts making use of a variety of distribution methods. Finally, we must understand HBO as being bound up in shifting technologies, regulations, and notions of what a cable channel could (or even should) be. Clearly the HBO of today is not at all the same HBO of twenty or thirty years ago and certainly not the same HBO of forty years ago when it was being developed by a small group of New York businessmen. It has become one of the biggest financiers of television series, documentaries, and Hollywood movies, and these are but a few of the cultural productions in which HBO has its hands. For its reach alone, if no other reason, we should train a more critical eye on HBO, and in order to do that we must start at the beginning.

Exploring the “Necessarily Brief” Early History of HBO

It is well known (that is, it is noted in many brief histories) that HBO was the brainchild of Charles “Chuck” Dolan, owner of New York cable company Sterling Communications. With what was originally a 20% investment from Time Inc., Dolan looked
to create a new cable channel that would offer movies and sports on a subscription basis. At the time, the plan was that HBO would agree to pay Hollywood studios like Universal Pictures a flat fee rental to “telecast” their films and pay Madison Square Garden for the right to televise live NBA games. To begin the task of getting cable systems signed up, HBO started with Allentown, Pennsylvania because the city had two competing cable systems instead of the usual single cable system monopoly. Playing them against each other, both cable companies agreed to add HBO to their offerings. Unfortunately, because Allentown was within 75 miles of the Philadelphia Spectrum Arena, HBO couldn’t relay NBA broadcasts from Madison Square Garden due to rights issues. So, instead, HBO moved down to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania – a small community with an equally small cable system. According to Mair, the first night of programming was a hockey game and the film, Sometimes a Great Notion, and thus, HBO was born.

So what are we to make of HBO’s first months and years of programming – a few films and sporting events? Of all the possibilities why these programs? Why rely heavily on sports rather than films? Why a subscription model rather than a pay-per-view model? One doesn’t have to look far to see how circumstances made these choices somewhat obvious in the early years. Hollywood films were not easy to get for cable telecast, and by drawing upon the live sports market, there would be clear value for subscribers who did not simply want to watch films that they had already seen in the theater. These choices were also informed by the backgrounds of the businessmen involved in these early decisions. One of the founding

90 That 20% investment soon turned into 50% in order to raise capital, and Time Inc. eventually bought Dolan out completely. See Mair (1988), 4.
members of the HBO team was Marty Glickman, a well-known New York sportscaster who therefore had contacts with the sports world. Additionally, Time Inc. could draw upon its *Sports Illustrated* holdings to gain leverage with teams and venues. Of course, a subscription model was already well established in Time Inc.’s magazine business and helps to explain why HBO was based on a subscription rather than pay-per-view model. It is also clear that HBO’s location in Manhattan, and its connection to particular people in the sports, magazine, and entertainment industries were of critical importance in determining the shape of this new cable venture.

If this project were to follow the pattern of other “necessarily brief” histories of HBO, it would at this point jump to October 1, 1975 and mention that HBO inaugurated its new satellite transmission capabilities to broadcast the final “Thrilla in Manilla” fight to its subscribers. This would be quickly followed by leapfrogging to 1983 when HBO premiered the first made-for-pay-TV movie, *The Terry Fox Story*, setting the stage to then talk about more recent original programs in the 1990s. The formula for these “necessary but brief” histories is well established and serves its purpose when one is attempting to historicize popular HBO programming from the late-1990s to today. With brief mentions of a few programs and important milestones here and there, the 1980s are almost nonexistent in HBO scholarship. It is certainly understandable that scholars of current programming would only summarize this period as it is not their object of study, but if we are to explore the ways that HBO established itself as a home for important and critically acclaimed cultural

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92 Oddly enough, *Inside HBO*, *The Essential HBO Reader*, and *Its Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Network Era* all list different dates for this event (September 30, 1975, October 1, 1975, and December 13, 1975 respectively) with only *The Essential HBO Reader* getting it right.
programming, we can’t skip over the years when this original programming began to take the shape with which we are familiar today. We must take our time through what seems to have become HBO’s lost decade.

For HBO, the 1980s were a time of rapid growth and increasing competition. It was also during this period that the cable network began to define its brand in a clear way. Long before Sunday nights became known for the sexual escapades of four single ladies in New York City or the relationship between a New Jersey mob boss and his therapist, HBO was developing a programming strategy that would bring with it critical acclaim and new customers. Before this point, HBO experimented with a variety of formats in order to increase its programming options and retain subscribers, but the key was programming. Subscribers would only sign up and stay if there was enough programming to keep them watching and paying the monthly fee.

These early years of programming were unsurprisingly diverse as there was not yet a clear approach to filling HBO’s schedule beyond attempting to get as much programming as it could in order to gather and retain subscribers – and to do so as cheaply as possible. As George Mair writes in his description of HBO’s 1976 programming line-up,

HBO continued to struggle with the programming problem of getting enough to satisfy its subscribers. The mix that HBO subscribers were offered was eclectic to say the least. For instance, in 1976, HBO subscribers saw thirteen American Film Theater plays; the BBC series The Pallisers; twelve Playboy Club comedians; a Bette Midler concert; the Folies Bergere from Las Vegas, and fourteen showings of Gone with the Wind. Of course, in 1976 HBO subscribers also got to see Cowtown Rodeos from Woodstown, New Jersey, local roller derbies; and many second-rate movies repeated too many times to count.\(^93\)

\(^{93}\) Mair (1988), 28-29.
It will become even clearer as we begin to look closely at HBO’s original programming, but even in this brief list we see already that HBO was borrowing programming ideas, formats, and even whole programs from public television. For example, HBO was not alone in rebroadcasting the BBC import, *The Pallisers*, as PBS also aired the British series. One could also easily imagine those thirteen American Film Theater plays finding a home on the average viewer’s local public television station. Another thing is clear in this early line-up from 1976; we already see HBO attempting to diversify its supplemental programming beyond sports.

As previously mentioned, the reason that HBO so desperately needed to fill its schedule was that Hollywood movies were difficult to get. This was due to FCC rules about how old the movies had to be before they could be telecast on cable. If the movies were under two years old or over ten years old, HBO would be allowed to run them, but the key films that were three to nine years old were protected for commercial television. Movie studios were still making money in theaters up to two years after a film’s release, so the most recent movies were clearly out of the question for HBO, and before the days of channels like Turner Classic Movies and American Movie Classics, cable providers weren’t sure that subscribers would pay a fee each month just to watch films more than ten years old.

Eventually HBO sued the FCC for the right to telecast movies that were, at the time, available only to broadcast television. The U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in HBO’s favor on March 29, 1977 in a ruling that became known as the HBO Decision.94

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94 Ibid., 31.
While this decision paved the way for HBO to dramatically increase the number of movies available for broadcast, it also created even more competition as this new rule applied to other cable channels as well. As late as 1981, it was still big news for HBO to acquire a package of eight films including *Tess* (1979), *Stripes* (1981), and *Heavy Metal* (1981) from Columbia for an undisclosed amount of money.\(^9^5\) Only weeks after the announcement of this deal, a more “long-term” arrangement was agreed upon, which would provide HBO with films from Columbia made from January of 1981 until 1984, giving HBO the right to air them all the way until 1986.\(^9^6\) With more premium cable channels such as Showtime, Encore, and The Movie Channel also vying for new-release films, there were still not enough to go around. Hollywood was simply not making enough movies per year (much less making them available to HBO), so HBO began to make “pre-buys” into films. A pre-buy would be a method of partially financing a film at the early stages of pre-production and getting exclusive pay-cable TV rights in return. Some big name examples of this method were *Sophie’s Choice* (1982), *First Blood* (1982), and *The King of Comedy* (1982). In addition to pre-buys, and the Columbia deals, HBO “bought a piece of Orion Pictures and had joined with CBS and Columbia in forming Tri-Star Productions.”\(^9^7\)

So while it was incredibly important to fill HBO’s line-up with as many new movies as possible, HBO was simultaneously pushing forward with its original programming to fill in the gaps still present in its schedule. The initial big push for original programming

\(^9^7\) Mair (1988), 73.
occurred between 1979-1985, but HBO had been using some original programming for quite some time. As Mair puts it,

HBO started life as a program broker, but it didn’t take too long for it to realize the necessity of creating programs on its own. For one thing, original programming was another step away from total dependence on the movie studios and sports as program sources as well as a step closer to the varied programming the commercial networks put on.  

As Mair notes, HBO had been creating some original programming since 1975 and even earlier if we count the broadcasting of the Allentown Pennsylvania Polka Festival. In 1979 HBO Vice President Michael Fuchs talked about HBO’s first forays into original programming saying, “Our first effort was On Location, which featured performers in nightclub and concert settings. But that form burns up quickly, so we have started acting more like a network, looking for new forms to try.” With this new approach, the number of original productions increased dramatically over the years, and in 1982 alone HBO purchased over 150 specials and sporting events.

While today HBO original films are often considered appointment television, it was not always the case. It seems that now almost any HBO premiere is water-cooler conversation the next day, but in the early years of HBO, original films were not nearly so revered. In fact, critical praise was not considered the priority for HBO executives. As late as 1983, Michael Fuchs again is quoted as saying, “We want to prove we can make commercially successful movies. The rarefied prestige movies are a luxury we cannot afford.” Additionally, critics almost universally panned the network’s early original films. For example, Tom Shales of The Washington Post called HBO’s original films “lousy” and

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98 Ibid., 51.
said that “no TV network executive should lose any sleep about competition from HBO.”

Tom Shales’ low opinion of HBO original films was actually widely held by other television critics at the time. While HBO’s original programming may have had high production values, these programs were not seen as the risk-taking face of HBO that exists now. In 1981, Ben Brown of the *Detroit News* wrote,

> I’m more concerned with risk than production values. Neither HBO nor Showtime is oriented that way. There’s no Norman Lear in cable, no groundbreaking programming. And it won’t come from the pay networks or USA Network or any big company. The real innovation will have to develop locally. Franchises will have to require that television be remade by lunatics too naïve and inexperienced to know there’s something that can’t be done. It won’t be a sweeping thing.

That same year, Tony Schwartz, the TV editor for *The New York Times*, had only slightly better things to say about HBO at this time. He writes,

> I’m ambivalent about HBO. For what it costs, it’s an extraordinarily good buy. I’ve got the access and the money to go to theaters and I’m just too impatient to wait for HBO… As for specials, they have yet to show much distinction. There’s a huge void to fill in that commercial TV provides junk. That’s the least original thing you’ll hear me say. But HBO and Showtime are mass audience-oriented. They’re not looking to make distinctive contributions but to secure the biggest audience they can get, maybe not at any one showing, but cumulatively, I’m cynical.

In addition to critics pandering the quality of its programs, other groups were unhappy with the more sensational programming on HBO. For example, a bulletin from St. Mary’s Church in Hearne, Texas was quoted in *Cablevision* as saying, “If there is any family subscribing to HBO, you are urged to discontinue supporting this greatest immoral filth that is being pumped into your home. The few good programs on HBO do not justify supporting

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100 Quoted in Mair (1988), 106.
101 Quoted in *Cablevision*, July, 6 1981, 27.
102 Quoted in *Cablevision*, July 6, 1981, 28.
As HBO was not terribly interested in creating critically acclaimed programming and more concerned with cheaply filling its schedule, it should not come as a big surprise that there was not a concerted effort to market HBO as the place for the most high-minded cultural programming. This would all change soon, though, as others were finding success in the cable industry by creating just that type of material. In turn, HBO would dramatically shift its approach to original programming.

HBO’s Shifting Strategies and the Search for the “Magic Recipe”

It was in the 1980s that HBO began to recast its image as a source not simply for exclusive televised sporting events and movies but also as a home for cultural programming “a cut above” what was available elsewhere, garnering awards and critical acclaim in the process. Unlike PBS, HBO was able to broadcast this programming without the aid of governmental assistance or underwriting from philanthropic foundations and actually made a profit doing so. Additionally, HBO’s cultural programming was able to combine popular culture aesthetics with high culture and did so, in many ways, by expanding upon the model offered by PBS. It prompts the question, why would a cable network that programs sports and movies venture into the realm of informational and public service programming? Of course, HBO’s primary goal was still to entertain and retain its subscribers, not to act as a public servant dedicated to informing the population and promoting civic democracy. Therefore, HBO seriously began its informational programming (or what the network originally termed “magazine programming”) only after it found early success with several

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103 Quoted in *Cablevision*, January 4, 1982, 58.
programs. These shifts in HBO’s programming strategy were not quick and were largely in response to increased competition from other cable networks that were also riding the wave of cultural programming.

HBO was surprisingly slow to increase its original programming and did so in part by reducing its reliance on sports programs. According to an article in *Cablevision*, HBO began to only “modestly reduce” its allocation of sports program slots in 1981 “in order to concentrate its programming budget on higher profiled events.” The sports audience was seen as a “loyal… young male segment that regularly [tuned] in for it” and was a significant part of HBO’s subscriber base that had to be kept intact. HBO’s 1981 budget for original programming was approximately $25 million, “only a slight increase from its 1980 budget” and HBO planned between 165-170 productions for that year. Many were to be “extensions of proven forms such as night club acts and magazine-type programming.” It was reported at the time that “HBO however [had] its eyes open for that special form or idea that will really set original programming apart from commercial broadcasting and the efforts of the other pay services.” As HBO’s vice-president of programming, Frank Biondi remarked in an interview given in late-1980, “There’s no magic recipe. It probably comes down to a combination of intuition, timing, and luck.” Because of the increasing competition from commercial broadcasters and other subscription-based pay-channels, HBO needed to find the thing that would set it apart, and to find it HBO began to create programming that was normally not the province of one of its cable competitors or network television but of public television. The signature difference that would come to set HBO apart was the type of

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programming PBS had come to be known for, socially committed documentaries and other culturally engaged programming. But, as HBO would soon demonstrate, it would produce them on a scale and with a flair for advertising that had not yet been seen.

This shift in HBO’s program strategy can be clearly seen in two programs broadcast between 1979 and 1980. These two programs could not be more different from each other, and they demonstrate the two particularly strong threads that continue to define HBO’s programming even today. The first was *Time Was* (1979), a six-part documentary mini-series hosted by Dick Cavett that focused each episode on an historical figure or event that shaped history such as Babe Ruth or the sinking of the Titanic. The second was *Candid Candid Camera* (1980), an uncensored and adult-oriented version of the popular *Candid Camera*. This series was produced by Alan Funt Productions and was broadcast on HBO and later on the Playboy Channel and eventually via videocassette.

Soon after HBO found success with *Time Was*, winning two awards at the Chicago International Film Festival, HBO decided to cancel the *Candid Candid Camera* series, despite it being a very popular program with HBO subscribers. In an interview, Michael Fuchs said, “It was one of the most popular original programs we had, but we are pulling it because of image and taste. It is not the type of project with which Time Inc. [HBO’s parent company] wants to be associated.” At this point, HBO was attempting to capitalize on the newly found success and critical acclaim that came from programs like *Time Was*. It wanted to position itself as a tastemaker rather than playing to the lowest common denominator to

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attract subscribers, for doing so would obviously have made it susceptible to the common criticisms of network television. Fuchs continues,

It was our feeling that an expanded version of the network show, which would allow more frankness and adult treatment, was a natural. I very much believe in adult entertainment and adult thought, but dirty isn’t funny. We are committed to specials of quality and taste. When is the last time you heard of a commercial network throwing successful series off the air because of taste? We’re throwing it off.

At the same time that HBO was winning awards with *Time Was* and canceling *Candid Candid Camera*, it was also finding success with its *Consumer Reports* series, which drew on the magazine holdings of its parent company. As an interviewer wrote, “The success of their *Consumer Reports* series has apparently convinced HBO that magazine-format programming has potential in pay television… With the pay networks having virtually the same movies… [Fuchs saw] each company’s efforts in original programming as defining the personality of the service.”

This combination of award-winning highbrow documentaries, successful informational programming, and HBO’s increasingly solidified image as a tastemaker rejecting the “dirty trash” of lowbrow (i.e. network) television helped push HBO into the type of programming that would come to define it as the vanguard cable network it is known as today. Importantly, though, the commitment to “adult entertainment and adult thought” that was initially the impetus to air *Candid Candid Camera* would remain present in a certain segment of its programming. Series such as *America Undercover*, *Real Sex*, and *Cathouse* would inevitably help give rise to the popular entertainment shows *Sex and the City* and *The

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106 Ibid.
Sopranos. After twenty years of programming, HBO has settled on a lucrative balance of adult material, unprecedented critical acclaim, and mainstream success.

After the success of Time Was, HBO duplicated its hit with Remember When (1981), an eight-part series that traced America’s history from early settlers to the twentieth century and also featured Dick Cavett as narrator. For its efforts with this series, HBO won several Cable ACE awards. The cable company’s newfound critical acclaim influenced its budgetary increases to informational and educational programming, and HBO went so far as to work with the National Educator’s Association to create study guides for Remember When and other select programming. These study guides were distributed to “approximately 300,000 educators and special interest groups across the country,” and, in turn, the NEA endorsed HBO’s programming in their professional journal – clearly a far cry from when HBO was offering its subscribers a few hours of sports or second-rate movies each night.107

Not wanting to end a working formula, HBO produced Yesteryear (1982), a six-part series that once again featured Dick Cavett and highlighted important moments in the nation’s history. The third iteration of this formula was not as well received as the first two. John J. O’Connor writes,

All of these programs use a similar format. Basically, it is a packaging, and repackaging, of old newsreels, photographs and film clips, wrapped in period music. The continuing gimmick is a special video technique that allows Mr. Cavett to “step into” the archival material and interact with the people or assorted objects. Seen once or twice, the trick is diverting. Over the long haul, however, it becomes merely silly.108

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So while not all of these programs were successful, the historical documentary format and the shift toward an increase in respectable cultural programming stuck.\textsuperscript{109}

HBO was not alone in making this move into cultural programming. In addition to new cable channel upstarts, broadcast networks were getting into the cable game. In an early announcement about the programming plans for CBS’s new cable channel, it was said that Bill Moyers would be returning to CBS from his post as the host of the successful \textit{Bill Moyers’ Journal} on PBS (Moyers had worked as the anchor of \textit{CBS Reports} before moving to PBS).\textsuperscript{110} For the launch of CBS Cable in October of 1981, Moyers would host a 20-part series of one-hour specials called \textit{A Walk Through the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century} (not unlike HBO’s \textit{Time Was, Remember When}, or \textit{Yesteryear}). Also included in CBS Cable’s upcoming plans was a scheme to have Norman Lear (creator of \textit{All in the Family}) be host an updated version of \textit{The Quiz Kids}, a trivia game show.\textsuperscript{111} It seemed that Ben Brown would get his wish, and cable would get its own Norman Lear – that is, it got Norman Lear.

At the time of its launch, CBS Cable would be on enough cable systems to boast over three million subscribers. One of CBS Cable’s advertisements in \textit{Cablevision} touted “the kind of cultural programming that doesn’t just appeal to high brows, cultural programming

\textsuperscript{109} Another odd experiment HBO tried in 1979 was to become a “preview system for network fare” or serve as a “testing ground for network pilots.” The idea was to get television producers to try their shows on HBO before sending them out to networks. Presumably the idea was that these one-off pilots would be cheap (or perhaps even free) for HBO to air, as it would serve as a test market. On the other hand, though HBO was not yet in the business of serial television, it is possible that if a pilot was successful and popular that HBO might purchase it for the cable channel. One such experiment was \textit{The Seekers} (1979), a two-part drama based on an historical fiction novel by John Jakes where a family interacts with important American historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln. It was produced by Operation Primetime (“a consortium of commercial stations”) and was set to air on network television later that year. This work of historical fiction is almost like a fantasy version of \textit{Time Was} in a less successful format. See Funt (1979).

\textsuperscript{110} It should also be noted that Dick Cavett also left his PBS show for work on cable.

that’s finding as much acceptance in large urban areas as in small rural areas.” The advertisement also made the case that the audience for CBS Cable was the kind of “upscale intelligent subscriber you can’t always get with movies and kick boxing.”\(^{112}\)

In some ways, CBS Cable was envisioned as a means to combine the successes of its news division with the “quality-oriented” segment of its more successful entertainment division. CBS Cable knew the competition it was up against (The Discovery Channel, Nickelodeon, HBO, and even PBS), and its promotional materials for cable providers were full of not-so-subtle digs at the perceived elitism of PBS and the bad movies and sports on HBO while trying to demonstrate that it could be popular and high-minded at the same time – that it had figured out the right way to balance profitability and public service.

In light of these moves from other cable channels, and after the success of its own programs *Time Was* and *Remember When*, HBO began to expand its cultural offerings in interesting ways. For example, HBO (like several other cable channels) explored the realm of filmed theater. HBO hired a successful Broadway producer, Arthur Whitelaw, as HBO Director of Theater Development (a position hard to imagine being created just two or three years earlier when second-rate Hollywood films dominated the schedule). Whitelaw is reported as saying in 1981 that HBO’s theater offerings would “take time to build an audience, doing it mostly with major plays and major stars.”\(^{113}\)

\(^{112}\) “CBS Cable Advertisement,” *Cablevision*, September 21, 1981.

beginning of 1982. Whitelaw noted that after the initial offerings of big plays and big stars, HBO would try out new playwrights and regional theater productions.

It is easy to see the logic of HBO’s hedge here. HBO was not getting into filmed theater due to a sense of public service duty or a philosophical commitment to cultural programming. Instead, filmed theater was an inexpensive way to fill its programming schedule, and relying on well-known productions and stars could be another avenue of entertainment programming. Of course, this is not to understate the amount of money that HBO was spending on some of these productions. For example, HBO paid over $1 million for the rights to cablecast a production of *Camelot* with Richard Harris as King Arthur. Not only did HBO purchase the rights to the production, the cable network even spent over $40,000 to upgrade the lighting in the theater to make it suitable for filming. Interestingly, though, HBO was only offered the rights to the production after the three major broadcast networks turned it down.\(^{114}\)

There were other examples of HBO venturing into cultural programming at this time, particularly in magazine programming. HBO built on the success of its *Consumer Reports* and *Sports Illustrated* magazine specials by creating an hour-long documentary special produced by *Ms. Magazine*. This documentary would “trace the history of the 20\(^{th}\) century American woman, depicting how women have been affected by recent social and economic events.”\(^{115}\) There were a number of other similar productions including a personal finance series called *Money Matters*. HBO even expanded its sports offerings into slightly more highbrow fare by taping an ice-skating special in the People’s Republic of China that


featured American, Canadian, and Chinese Olympians.\textsuperscript{116} There was even talk of HBO creating a basic-cable channel for its informational, educational, and cultural programming but instead HBO decided to put it all together in a single channel. As Avi Santo argues,

> On a fairly simple level, pay cable must appear to offer something that subscribers cannot get either on free TV (the networks) or for the price of basic cable, and which viewers believe is superior to those cheaper alternatives. Thus, HBO must continuously promote discourses of “quality” and “exclusivity” as central to the subscription experience.\textsuperscript{117}

This move is echoed in many of HBO’s more recent decisions – relying on exclusivity to increase the perceived value of its programming. We can see this in the 2010s with HBO withholding its content from streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu and instead offering it for purchase from iTunes only after the DVD release window. Whether through HBO’s own website or their iPad app (via HBO GO), the only way to receive HBO content before DVD release is to be a paying subscriber.

**Defining HBO as Television in a Post-Network, Post-Cable, Post-Television Era**

By focusing on HBO’s early history, we uncover a great deal about HBO’s present incarnation. Its formula for success was not pre-determined nor was it some “magic recipe” that HBO concocted out of thin air. Instead, HBO began with the programming that was available, inexpensive, and thought to be popular. HBO as we know it today did not spring up fully formed. The transition from a pay channel that offered sporting events, comedy specials, and television premieres of Hollywood films to the distributor of culturally

\textsuperscript{117} Santo (2008), 20.
significant and socially committed programming was not quick and was the result of market forces, industrial synergy, and branding. Given the historical context in which HBO found itself, in the middle of debates over the future of public television, HBO made calculated moves to turn itself into a profitable distributor of material normally found on public television and, ultimately, an arbiter of taste.

While HBO’s most recent tagline, “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” portrays the cable channel as some nebulous entity that cannot be defined by the standards of conventional television, Avi Santo argues that HBO should, instead, be considered para-television. He writes,

The end result for HBO is neither television in the traditional network era sense of the word (not that anything produced in the post-network landscape truly is) nor “not television,” but, as… the production of para-television, which purposely relies on mimicking and tweaking existing and recognizable TV forms. \(^{118}\)

Santo goes on to define para-television as “the production practices and programming choices that are purposely situated alongside recognizable television forms in order to confer meaning upon them.”\(^{119}\) In Santo’s argument, HBO experiments with the forms of network television (particularly half-hour situation comedies and hour-long dramas) in order to offer recognizable programs that “distinguish its product from standard network fair while simultaneously looking to broadcast and cable networks as sites for future syndication and production deals.” While such terminology helps us to understand HBO’s fictional series and, particularly, its more recent market strategy when auxiliary markets and network syndication is a priority, HBO’s early informational programming was, I believe, quite

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., 24.
solidly television and not some fuzzy in-between. In fact, as this dissertation argues, the type of non-fiction, socially committed programming that has come to define HBO’s branding as “not TV” is quite clearly a direct update of television, though not network television – public television.
Chapter 4
“If PBS Doesn’t Do It, Who Will?”
Popular Aesthetics and Public Service Television

Throughout this project, I demonstrate that aligning the history of HBO with the history of PBS is a productive way of examining HBO’s early years and a way to historically situate HBO’s current position in the television landscape. Network television, public service television, and cable television have long been intertwined when it comes to technology, regulation, and a need to contend with television’s competing goals of profitability and public service. When tracing this history, it is also important to attend to the differences between these forms of television. While analyzing how HBO (and other cable channels) made programming choices that were responses to the intensified discourse of public service during the cable boom, I will also carefully attend to the important differences between HBO and PBS.

This chapter is a detailed examination of the relationship between HBO and PBS, particularly the consequences of their differing economics, corporate structures, and uses of popular aesthetics. Through the course of this chapter these differences demonstrate how programming that is culturally engaged (and even at times progressive) is limited in its ability to critique social relations due to a variety of constraints imposed upon it. Importantly, this will not simply be a laundry list of ways that various forces limit progressive messages, nor will it be a celebration of HBO or PBS at the expense of the other. Both programming outlets have complex and interesting histories and have had various levels of success with providing important social critiques. HBO and PBS are important television outlets for cultural programming such as documentary filmmaking, educational programming for
children, and programs with “alternative” viewpoints, and surely a detailed analysis of how these two media institutions have been in conversation with each other is long overdue. More specifically, this chapter also sets the contextual stage for chapter five’s more specific analysis on HIV/AIDS programs on PBS and HBO.

Cultural Programming and the Limits of Social Critique

It goes without saying that HBO is first and foremost concerned with being a profitable company. In order to be profitable, HBO has developed a programming lineup over the years that, in many ways, set itself apart from its competition. The formula at work is mixture of popular Hollywood films, premium live sporting events, and original programming, and it is in this original programming where we are able to see the bulk of its cultural programs and social critique. While many of HBO’s projects (especially in the realm of documentary film) may have an expressed interest in performing a public service or social critique, this is not the primary intention (stated or implicit) of HBO or its parent company, Time Warner. Clearly most of HBO’s schedule and programming investments are focused on entertainment rather than educational or information programming, but as we will continue to see, HBO’s cultural programs play an important role in the cable channel’s branding strategy as well as an important role in our recent media and social histories.

As an equally important producer of cultural material, PBS also relies on this programming as a way to separate itself from commercial television. Unlike HBO, PBS is not primarily concerned with being a profitable enterprise. While there is an ever-increasing need for PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to be a financially sound
enterprise in a sometimes-hostile political environment, profitability is never the prime directive. With an ever-shrinking budget, PBS is not a well-funded utopia of public service television, and due to economic concerns, PBS has been forced to make compromises regarding content. That said, for many years PBS has provided U.S. television with programming unavailable elsewhere. Network television has never managed to negotiate profitability and public service in a way that privileged education and information over entertainment, nor did it ever intend to. In some ways PBS’s desire to keep entertainment on the back burner has been its Achilles heel in terms of viewership and popularity and has left it open to charges of elitism or of being out of touch with the viewing public. Where PBS largely eschewed popular aesthetics and entertainment value for the sake of hard facts, rational discourse, or highbrow literary adaptations, other cable entities such as HBO (or more recently, The Learning Channel and Discovery) have not been so shy to include more than just a spoonful of sugar with their cultural programming. As we will see, cable television, and HBO in particular, has often wholeheartedly embraced this tactic.

As different as they may be, HBO and PBS share many programming aspects and have sometimes even shared actual programs. It could even be said that both have similar goals of providing entertainment, offering public service programming, and doing well financially despite the different weight that each would give to these priorities. Although they may seem incredibly dissimilar on the surface, as we have seen with the early histories of both media institutions, it is impossible to reduce either television producer/distributor to a simple dichotomy of profitability versus public service. A more nuanced analysis is surely required. While PBS and HBO were both considered corrective of network television, they
began with incredibly different missions. One was meant to inform the citizenry and promote
civic democracy and the other was meant to entertain paying subscribers with exclusive
content that justified the added expense to their cable bill. Throughout their history PBS and
HBO have, at times, been broadcasters of progressive programming, but if either could be
understood to be critiquing oppressive social relations or taking a stand on certain political
issues, both are obviously working within particular (and radically different) structures of
power, largely due to their different economic models.

Any critique of social relations made by PBS must be understood to exist within a
framework that is non-commercial but not without consequence. As funding for PBS comes
from the federal government, foundations, philanthropies, and corporate underwriting –
sources that for a variety of reasons, have it in their best interests to promote cultural
programming – PBS’s critiques are usually limited by a philosophy of promoting civic
democracy and bettering the public good. Radical critique does not typically serve the
interest of PBS’s benefactors, leaving whatever critique that is made to be one that is at least
implicitly endorsed by those private and public sources of funding. While some PBS
programming is able to exist outside of that framework, and will be discussed in this chapter,
the majority of PBS’s programming is non-confrontational and even genteel.

On the other hand, HBO is a private enterprise created to make a profit. It is only
beholden to Time Warner, and as long as HBO works in the interests of the shareholders (i.e.
by increasing profit), whatever social critique that enters its programming may exist as long
as it does not jeopardize HBO’s bottom line. There are, of course, instances of acceptable
fluctuation in this logic, and controversial outliers sometimes use controversy to drum up
publicity in the service of that bottom line. As we will see, the social critique that is at the heart of many of these programs can often be traced to particular individuals who, for a variety of reasons, have the power to make programming decisions or green-light projects based on a track record of success. As John Caldwell writes, “While film and television are influenced by macroscopic economic processes, they also very much function on a microsocial level as local cultures and social communities in their own right.”\(^{120}\) This means that the personal biographies and stated political leanings of key players are meaningful to the extent that they may illuminate how these individuals have impacted production decisions. Media scholars, therefore, must look through the public relations at work when studying production culture as texts. As I demonstrate at various points in this dissertation, many of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programs were the personal projects of directors, producers, and writers that felt very strongly that a particular message of critique needed to be heard.

That said, the individuals with the ability to spearhead productions that critique social relations are still in a hegemonic relationship with a whole matrix of interests that limit the extent to which critique is a part of HBO’s programming and brand identity. As Todd Gitlin demonstrates in his study of television producers who seek to create socially conscious programming, even though projects may be the product of blood, sweat, and tears from passionate individuals, those producers still “negotiate and act out capitalist imperatives passed down to industry via dominant cultural interests.”\(^{121}\) As Caldwell notes, though, Gitlin’s work was written at a time when the three major networks were the dominant forces


in television, and an updated approach that takes into account the shifts of the post-network era provides an opportunity to examine how notions of a mass culture and mass audience must be replaced by a niche or narrowcast audience – that is to say, a more flexible environment where profitability is not tied to viewership numbers alone. Due to the changes brought on by cable television (much less the ways in which even newer technologies have altered the relationship between media industries and audiences) studies of the post-network era must address concerns of textual analysis, cultural studies, political economy, and studies of technology. Any one of these approaches, on its own, render an incomplete analysis of a media industry, though an approach that ignores any number of them faces the same difficulty.

As Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren articulate in their study of media industries, there is a “pressing need to bring interdisciplinary scholarship on media industries into a common dialogue”\textsuperscript{122} Following this logic, I also see as valuable “uniting political economy’s interest in ownership, regulation, and production with cultural studies’ interest in texts, discourse, audiences, and consumption.”\textsuperscript{123} This approach to media industries “foreground[s] the role of individual agents within larger media structures”\textsuperscript{124} while also being sensitive to what Michele Hilmes sees as a situation where “individual authorship in the traditional sense still most certainly takes place, but within a framework that robs it, to a greater or lesser degree of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123] Holt and Perren (2009), 8.
\item[124] Ibid., 8.
\end{footnotes}
its punitive autonomy."125 It is this combination of approaches that informs this project’s emphasis on media texts and producers while also considering issues of political economy and governmental logic. As Douglas Kellner writes,

“Political economy” does not merely pertain solely to economics, but to the relations between the economic, political, technological, and cultural dimensions of the social context in which media industries function. The structure of political economy links culture to its political and economic context and opens up cultural studies to history and politics. It refers to a field of contestation and antagonism and not an inert structure caricatured by some of its opponents.126

Following Kellner and others, by seeing media industries as a site of contestation, producer intentionality must come into play as long as consideration of that intentionality also takes into account broader political and cultural contexts.

Outside of industrial forces of capitalism, which inform the limits of social critique in the television industry, a broader cultural environment also informs these programs. As I have pointed out, this cultural environment is bound up in an era of intensified neoliberal economic policies and the playing out of governmental technologies – something that becomes quite clear when we consider HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming in the late 1980s and early 1990s in more detail. These details are all important to keep in mind when considering how and why certain programming and representational decisions were made in regard to PBS and HBO’s cultural programming. While HBO is certainly not a small independent producer fighting the system, its position as a subscription-based pay-cable channel does

provide it more opportunity for social critique as does its program origination and acquisition structure and non-commercial programming format (both of which are quite similar to PBS).

**PBS Fights the Good Fight: Frontline, P.O.V., and ITVS**

The limitations of television in the realm of activism and politics have been explored by a number of scholars. In Patricia Aufderheide’s work on PBS, she argues that the purpose of PBS is not to broadcast programming that incites the public to become a politically committed and mobilized democratic force but rather to cultivate a proper citizen who is rational and informed.\(^\text{127}\) Laurie Ouellette writes,

Aufderheide favors the independent documentaries created under the auspices of Independent Television Service, public television’s most progressive, experimental, and – significantly – marginalized wing. While few and far between, these programs come the closest to an alternative approach to public television that is committed to bridging social conflicts, combating consumerism, building communities, activating disadvantaged and exploited citizens, and fostering the common good.\(^\text{128}\)

The work of Independent Television Service (ITVS) has been known for controversial films such as Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* (1990), a film about homosexual African-Americans or Todd Haynes' short film *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), an exploration of sexual discovery and repression. In *Dottie Gets Spanked*, for example, Haynes adapts Sigmund Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten” into a short film about a boy who fetishizes a 1950s television star.

Established by Congress in 1988 and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, ITVS began producing and airing films in 1991 and has since come under attack by conservatives for its clearly progressive viewpoints. In the same way that Robert


\(^{128}\) Ouellette (2002), 12.
Mapplethorpe’s work was famously attacked for its explicit content and prompted campaigns to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, PBS has come under scrutiny for its supposed liberal bias, progressive agenda, and incendiary content because of programming like that produced by ITVS. These attacks combined with neoliberal agendas intent on dismantling social welfare policies have meant continued budget cuts to public television, so that foundations, philanthropies, and corporations underwrite much of PBS’s programming. So, understandably, PBS’s reliance on support from a variety of non-governmental institutions places further limitations on the type of content that gets aired on public television. Fortunately for ITVS, due to its federal funding, it does not need to approach those institutions for underwriting. Like ITVS, the Frontline and P.O.V. series are paid for by PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and are also often the home for more progressive, socially committed programming.

Frontline, established in 1983, has been called the “only long-format, public affairs documentary series on PBS that is sanctioned to deal with… the controversial issues of the day.” Independent producers supply Frontline with topics for films that examine contemporary issues and get their funding directly from Frontline in exchange for giving up editorial control over the final program. While the idea may come from independent producers, the overall format of the series retains a consistent voice. In her discussion of the series, B.J. Bullert writes, “Because Frontline receives all of its funding from PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, these organizations serve as a heat shield between Frontline producers and irate interest groups. Moreover, [Frontline] doesn’t have to worry

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about alienating particular corporate underwriters or individual financial donors.”¹³⁰ Unlike many of the programs on public television, these funding circumstances allow for more progressive critique to be possible from programs that air on the series. Of course, particular journalistic standards (of content and form) provide *Frontline* with a relatively mainstream structure and content with, at most, a center-left ideology.

On the other hand, *P.O.V.*, established in 1988, was “devoted to independent nonfiction films that had a strong or unusual point of view” and would have been rejected by *Frontline* because “they did not fit the aesthetic or journalistic standards of the series.”¹³¹ Unlike *Frontline*, independent producers were paid to broadcast their material and retained editorial control over the production. The mission of *P.O.V.*, Bullert writes, is to “provide a platform for voices not present elsewhere on television and in this society. *P.O.V.*’s mission echoed the original 1967 mandate for public television, a dream many independent documentary producers and some station staff shared.”¹³² James Day writes, “By 1991 and its third season, *P.O.V.* began to demonstrate a talent for upsetting the domestic tranquility of the public medium.”¹³³ Films like *Absolutely Positive* (1991) about a group of HIV-positive men and women, *Maria’s Story* (1990), the story of a woman in Salvador who became a guerrilla leader, and, of course, *Tongues United* all “raised the mercury in the political thermometer.”¹³⁴ What becomes clear is that the funding situation of *P.O.V.* makes possible the type of critique allowed as its funding comes from the MacArthur Foundation, PBS, the

¹³¹ Ibid., 31.
¹³² Ibid., 32.
NEA, and other foundations. Additionally, *P.O.V.* experiments with more radical aesthetic forms and subjective narrative strategies since there is not an imperative to maintain a series-wide cohesive format or institutionalized journalistic integrity.

**HBO’s Cutting-Edge Cultural Programming**

Similarly, HBO is both enabled and constrained in the type of programming it airs even though it is not reliant on corporate sponsorship or under the jurisdiction of the same restrictions by which network television must abide. Due to its business model as a subscription-based pay channel, market forces largely determine HBO’s content as it must create programming that retains and increases its subscriber base. Clearly, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, HBO’s primary competition was from other pay channels like Showtime and The Movie Channel, and in order to set the network apart, HBO had to be unique and create a signature style. While certainly a good start, this style could not simply be founded on informational programming like *Consumer Reports* or the programs that were more historical in nature and epic in scope like *Time Was* or *Remember When*, programming forms which The Discovery Channel and The History Channel were on their way to making their own primary programming format. Instead, for HBO, these early successes soon gave way to more socially committed programming that utilized the channel’s unique position as an opportunity to create content that was often controversial, edgy, and popular.

Like PBS, HBO produces or co-produces documentaries in-house or purchases the rights to independently produced documentaries. One could think of HBO Documentary Films as a combination of *Frontline* and *P.O.V.* updated for pay-cable television, sometimes
commissioning projects and sometimes buying the rights to documentaries at film festivals or by other means. In line with HBO’s image, these documentaries are often informational and thought-provoking while also being entertaining. Many in-house documentary productions are created under the umbrella of America Undercover (1984-present) one of HBO’s longest-running series. The films in this series often focus on controversial topics such as abortion, prostitution, sexual abuse, and capital punishment, and have always been promoted as edgy and containing content not found on other channels. This can be clearly seen in the reality television style programs such as Real Sex, Taxicab Confessions, and Cathouse.

Most recently, HBO Documentary Films has been involved in distributing some of the most critically acclaimed documentary films of the past ten years. These documentaries are often purchased from independent producers for distribution or co-produced by HBO, and many have gone on to earn Academy Award nominations and wins. Some of the most talked about documentary films in recent years have been aired on HBO: films like Chernobyl Heart (2003), Pandemic: Facing AIDS (2003), Born into Brothels (2004), Iraq in Fragments (2006), Looking for Fidel (2006), When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006), Ghosts of Abu Ghraib (2007), The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo (2007), Burma VJ (2008), and For Neda (2010). In particular, Pandemic: Facing AIDS was not simply a documentary but the centerpiece of a multifaceted global campaign to raise

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135 In recent years, HBO Documentary Films has been a major sponsor of the Full Frame Documentary Festival, one of the largest documentary film festivals in the world. Where filmmakers used to place PBS as the most prized venue for their film, it could be argued that HBO has taken over as the most coveted avenue for television distribution.
awareness of the global AIDS pandemic, with major funding for the project provided by the AOL-Time Warner Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Of course, these popular (and sometimes theatrically-released) feature-length documentaries are only the most recent and most visible segment of HBO’s informational programming. HBO has a long history of creating cultural programming as is evident with the Consumer Reports series and the historical documentaries like Remember When and Time Was. In the 1980s and 90s, HBO began to produce a number of educational programs in its “Project Knowledge” series, a public service-oriented series of educational videos distributed to schools, libraries, and other organizations in addition to being aired on HBO. The series included specials on issues such as AIDS, child abuse, and abortion, and was seen by HBO as “a steady stream of powerful, informative” productions “increasing [HBO’s] commitment to the public interest by producing new programs on additional health subjects such as smoking, stress, and surviving childhood cancer.” Some programs in this series were in the form of dramatic after school specials like Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story (1992) but others were documentaries such as AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know... But Were Afraid to Ask, which, like several of the “Project Knowledge” programs, was coupled with workbooks for educators and community organizations when distributed on videocassette.

In many ways, AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know provides an opportunity to see just how PBS and HBO were performing very similar tasks in radically different contexts. In the same year that HBO broadcast this informational program about

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136 Advertising copy from the back of the VHS box for AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know... But Were Afraid to Ask. (Ambrose Video/HBO Home Video: 1987).
AIDS, PBS broadcast *AIDS: Changing the Rules* (1987). Both productions were designed to provide information about AIDS and inform viewers about safe-sex practices. PBS’s program begins with a very stiff and professional announcer who warns parents to use discretion if their kids are also watching and then moves into a highly scripted PSA featuring Ron Reagan, Beverly Johnson, and Rubén Blades. HBO’s program, on the other hand, is an informal question and answer session with U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop where he answers questions in a straightforward and frank way. HBO personnel compiled questions taken from people interviewed on the street, phone surveys, and focus groups, and then Dr. Koop answers them on camera.

In the moments where the PBS program attempts to be hip and connect with a younger audience, it falls flat. Beverly Johnson and Rubén Blades appear awkward when using slang words, and Rubén Blades famously demonstrates how to put a condom on a banana while making lame attempts at humor. Paula Treichler notes that a great deal of American network media, not surprisingly, represents AIDS in an overly simplified way, and does not candidly discuss things like gay male sexuality or safe sex practices. She continues,

> Public television’s role could be to provide critical and interpretive commentary on the prevailing stereotypes of the commercial networks; instead, it reiterates professional wisdom, merely performing such tasks as translating scientific language into baby talk and generally reproducing the most conventional views about the function and role of “art.”

On the other hand, in HBO’s program Dr. Koop “gives candid answers to the most commonly asked questions about AIDS. Dr. Koop never hedges. He answers with straight, simple facts that are neither prurient nor prudish and will not create embarrassment among

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mixed audiences.” The creative and editorial differences between these two documentaries clearly demonstrate that even when PBS and HBO were dealing with the same subject matter at the same time, the parameters in which they created programming greatly determined the tone, format, and image that each broadcaster wished to maintain.

Over the next twenty years, HBO continued producing public service-oriented programs and in 2007 partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) to create “The Addiction Project” – part film project and part multimedia outreach program. The film component, ADDICTION (2007), is a feature-length documentary film composed of nine separate segments directed by filmmakers of high regard including Albert Maysles, Eugene Jarecki, Rory Kennedy, D.A. Pennebaker, and Barbara Kopple – a lineup that sounds like a documentary star-studded spectacular. There are additional companion short-pieces in the “Complementary Series,” which feature conversations with health professionals and the “Supplementary Series,” which are additional short films. The website for the project contains articles, information, and discussion forums dedicated to addiction, and the book, titled Addiction: Why Can’t They Just Stop, is a 256-page, hardcover companion that features the latest research and additional material not found

138 Ad copy from VHS box for AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know... But Were Afraid to Ask (Ambrose Video/HBO Home Video, 1987).

139 In a social scientific study published in 1990, these PBS and HBO programs were shown to high school students and concluded that watching the programs increased knowledge but had no effect on the perceived taboo nature of AIDS. More importantly, the fact that the study used programs from PBS and HBO not only demonstrates the similarities in programming but also the lack of such programming on network television. See Walter Gantz and Bradley S. Greenberg, “The Role of Informative Television Programs in the Battle Against AIDS,” Health Communication 2 (1990): 199-215.
in the film series.\textsuperscript{140} Taken together, “The Addiction Project” is a multi-tiered effort to promote an understanding of the causes and effects of addiction, working to solidify its position as a provider of public service and building on its efforts with “Project Knowledge,” the work surrounding \textit{Pandemic: Facing AIDS}, and many other programs over the years.

It is not just the after school specials and documentary films that make up HBO’s socially committed programming. Many of HBO’s dramatic films and mini-series have particular ideological or political viewpoints and goals and are made expressly to address pressing (and often controversial) social concerns. HBO Films has produced numerous films of this sort like \textit{And the Band Played On} (1993), \textit{The Laramie Project} (2002), \textit{The Girl in the Café} (2005), and \textit{Recount} (2008) to name a few. Of course, like PBS, HBO produces a number of historical films that dramatize our nation’s history. One need only think of \textit{From the Earth to the Moon} (1998), \textit{Band of Brothers} (2001), \textit{Angels in America} (2003), \textit{Iron Jawed Angels} (2004), \textit{John Adams} (2008), and \textit{Generation Kill} (2008). Many of these were precisely the kind of large-budget, epic-length productions that render them impossible to produce for network television or theatrical release and could only find a place on HBO.\textsuperscript{141}

For much of HBO’s history, cultural programming has been a solid portion of its programming output, but have these programs explicitly critiqued social relations or pointed

\textsuperscript{140} John Hoffman and Susan Froemke (eds.), \textit{Addiction: Why Can’t They Just Stop?} (New York: Rodale Press and HBO, 2007) \texttt{<http://www.hbo.com/addiction>}

\textsuperscript{141} HBO’s comedy specials might also be considered largely liberal and progressive. Its \textit{Comic Relief} series is comprised of stand-up comedy programs that benefit causes like homelessness and disaster relief. Largely the project has been led by Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, and Billy Crystal and is modeled on the British version of \textit{Comic Relief} charity project created by Richard Curtis to raise money for famine in Ethiopia and other charitable causes. Additionally, one might think of \textit{Real Time With Bill Maher} (2003- present) as a clearly liberal and progressive comedy show that is openly critical of the political establishment. It could also be said that HBO rescued Bill Maher’s \textit{Politically Incorrect} (Comedy Central, 1993-1996 and ABC, 1997-2002) after Maher’s show was canceled due to his controversial remarks about the 9/11 hijackers.
out inequality or oppression? If so, what makes HBO the place for that type of critique rather than network television, Hollywood cinema, or even public television? On one hand, one might consider *America Undercover*’s stark documentaries about drug addicts or prostitutes facing difficult conditions, groups who rarely get a sympathetic and three-dimensional portrayal in other venues. Simply giving representation to these marginalized groups that society often wishes to forget about might be a step in the direction of pointing out inequality and social injustice. On the other hand, one could consider big budget advocacy films like *And The Band Played On*, which explicitly criticized the government’s response in the early years of the AIDS epidemic or *The Laramie Project*, a moving film that dramatizes the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. This film was not only a call for tolerance across the nation but also one that appeared during a time when debates about hate-crime legislation were reaching their peak, making it even more relevant. Of course, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* continues this trend of utilizing HBO’s resources to advocate for particular causes in documentary form.

One of the most explicit critiques of inequality came in 2005 with the film *The Girl in the Café*. This film tells the fictional story of a low-level British finance secretary who attends a G8 summit in Reykjavik, Iceland. He brings along a young woman who is so moved by his reports that she ultimately pleads with the G8 leaders to dramatically increase their commitments to eradicate global poverty. The film was meant to rally support for the ONE Campaign, which worked toward ending global poverty by pressuring the 2005 G8 summit to push forward the “Millennium Goals.” The film premiered just two weeks before the real G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland and just one week before the globally organized
Live8 concerts. Interestingly, the film was a co-production with the BBC and actually premiered on the same day on HBO and on the BBC in Great Britain. Written by Richard Curtis (writer of the popular Hollywood films *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Love Actually*), this film aimed to be entertaining and fun while leveling a calculated demand upon the G8 to ramp up their efforts to end global poverty.

Through its blending of comedy, pathos, and a progressive agenda, *The Girl in the Café* was able to combine entertainment, an informative message, and even a call to action in a way that has come to be the hallmark of HBO’s approach to its socially committed programming. In many ways, blending education and popular aesthetics has been something PBS has largely been unable to accomplish, leading many to charge it with elitism and only appealing to high culture values. As Laurie Ouellette points out,

Children’s programming on public television had to reach a disadvantaged audience that cut across class and race differences, which led to experiments with multicultural popular aesthetics. Prime-time PBS, though, could not simultaneously be popular and symbolize the pursuit of excellence; it had to be superior to the mass culture it was supposed to improve.\(^{142}\)

While PBS’s early morning children’s programming are multicultural, colorful shows like *Sesame Street* and *Barney and Friends*, the evening shows like *Masterpiece Theater* and *Antiques Roadshow* are meant to reflect a cultivated, upper-middle class viewership with refined tastes. With much larger budgets and a mission firmly situated in the entertainment business, HBO’s can still position its programming (and its viewers) as “a cut above” while

\(^{142}\) Ouellette (2002), 76-77.
still retaining popular aesthetics (and notions of populism) that will appeal to the middle and upper-middle class.¹⁴³

Despite the charges of elitism against PBS, and HBO’s attempts to avoid those traps through its use of popular aesthetics, it appears that viewers of PBS and HBO are situated as upwardly mobile, socially liberal, and accepting of difference. In the case of HBO, configuring its audience as such is very much a marketing strategy, but, at the same time, HBO also seems to form a politically oriented public from this particular audience demographic. Vice versa, it could of course be said that HBO is taking a politically oriented public and turning it into a demographic as well. Criticisms and charges of elitism or commercialism have not hampered the critical praise of both broadcasters’ programming, which has been largely considered superior to that of network television. The praise of public television that appeared in the few years after its creation could just as easily be translated to HBO’s programming from the 1980s to now. Between 1970 and 1972,

Commentators proclaimed public television’s superiority over mass culture, ignoring its claim to publicness and magnifying evidence of originality versus seriality, live performances versus tele-films, serious artistry versus formulaic programs “ground out” factory style... Even public television’s most radical feature, its commercial-free format, was contrasted with lowbrow mediocrity, praised more as a signifier of cultural distinction than an alternative way to produce TV culture.¹⁴⁴

For HBO, its commercial-free format, distinctive programming, and social commitment create both a “signifier of cultural distinction” and “an alternative way to produce TV culture.” It is the commercial-free format of PBS and HBO to which I will now turn, as this

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¹⁴³ This blending of popular aesthetics and education can even be seen through the same “Muppets.” As Sesame Street’s primary aim was to educate through entertainment, HBO’s use of Jim Henson’s characters in its own Fraggle Rock (1983-1987) fourteen years later was clearly about entertaining first, and if there were educational or moral messages as well, so much the better.

programming structure signifies cultural distinction and an alternative mode of television production while also cultivating a particular type of viewership. This mode of viewership is specific to PBS and HBO and perhaps most clearly points out the ways in which these two broadcasters use comparable programming formats to differentiate themselves from network television while distinctly pointing out their similarities to each other.

Appointment Television: The Distinctly Non-Commercial Flow of PBS and HBO

Being commercial-free has always been one of the major points of distinction for PBS and HBO. This not only affects content, as programs are uninterrupted by commercials and do not have to be formatted in small segments in order to account for the pauses in narrative, but also, more importantly, the commercial-free format helps to cultivate an image of a particular type of viewer. Those writing about public television in the early 1970s believed that “unlike the masses, the anticipated audience for public television did not consider watching TV a habit.”145 Public television was expected to draw the viewers who would only purposefully watch television for particular programs and not be entranced by what Raymond Williams has famously called “flow,” which, for Williams, characterizes not only the program schedules on network television (and, interestingly public television) but perhaps is “the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form.”146 He writes, “There has been a significant shift from the concept of

145 Ibid., 64.
146 Williams (2003), 86.
sequence as *programming* to the concept of sequence as *flow.*”

Citing the structure of programs to included planned interruptions by commercials, station identification logos, and trailers for upcoming programs, he notes that this became even more “intensified in conditions of competition when it became important for broadcast planners to retain viewers – or as they put it – to ‘capture them’ for a whole evening’s sequence.”

So while this clearly describes network television and commercial cable channels, does the notion of flow account for PBS or HBO’s programming format? Yes and no – or better yet - sometimes, but not always. Like network television, PBS and HBO operate with a programming logic that separates daytime and prime-time programming into thirty-minute, hour-long, or longer slots and schedules a several-hour block of time with one program logically leading to the next. For example, PBS typically schedules children’s programming in the morning, cooking and travel programs during the day, news programs after work, and cultural/artistic programming in the evening. Each of these programming blocks operates to appeal to (or accommodate) the schedules of “the American household” but are clearly not intended to keep the same viewer glued to the television at all times of the day. On the other hand, viewership in each block is meant to continue from program to program (for example, after watching one children’s or cultural program, a viewer might watch the next one).

While HBO’s current programming model includes feature-length films at all times of the day, HBO used to have a more traditional programming model in the 1980s and early 1990s after it became a twenty-four-hour cable channel. HBO used to schedule children’s programming in the morning, movies during the day, and then a mixture of magazine

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147 Ibid., 89.
148 Ibid., 91.
programming, documentaries, and movies in the evening with new movie premieres on Saturday night. In more recent years, HBO has attempted to capture Sunday night viewers in a large block by programming the premieres of new episodes of hit series like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* or *Bored to Death* (2009-present) and *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present) along with *America Undercover* documentaries all in one cohesive block of television.\(^{149}\) In neither PBS nor HBO are individual programs interrupted by commercials, but on PBS there are still title cards before and after programs that announce where the funding came from, and sometimes (to the annoyance of many viewers) PBS programs are interrupted during pledge drives. Both PBS and HBO also continually air promos and program schedules in between programs to inform viewers of upcoming programs (especially Sunday nights on HBO), though, importantly, these promos are often for programs scheduled to air later in the evening, week, or month. Of course, there are bumpers in between programs that announce what will be coming up next, but the frequency is not the same as having the station IDs and advertisements interrupt the program at various intervals like on network television.

Rather than attempting to keep the viewer stuck on PBS or HBO throughout the entire day and night, both channels operate according to an “appointment television” model. In this model there are particular specials or premieres that will be airing in the future, and marketing campaigns inform viewers to tune in at particular times. It is not expected that

viewers will watch a three-hour programming block every night in the same way that CBS, ABC, or NBC might expect a large number of their viewers to do, and there is clearly no economic need for them to do so. Since neither PBS nor HBO rely on ratings of particular programs for advertising revenue, it doesn’t particularly matter who watches what. In the case of HBO, Amanda D. Lotz writes,

> The range of targeted programming interests enables the networks to use the subscription fees of boxing fans to help finance original series, the fees of those subscribing for original series to buy movie rights, the fees of those subscribing to see original drama series help supplement documentary series’ costs, and so on, thereby creating a radically different economic situation and, consequently, programming environment.\(^{150}\)

Importantly, HBO is no longer even a single channel that must appeal to blocks of viewers at different points in the day. With the addition of multiple HBO channels (HBO Latino, HBO Family, HBO Comedy, etc.) there is no longer a need to schedule children’s programming for the morning. In many cable and satellite lineups, younger viewers have an entire twenty-four-hour channel for children’s programming on HBO Family.

So while PBS and HBO may not operate under the same model of flow that network television or commercial cable channels might, there is still a programming logic and (particularly on Sunday night HBO) there may still be traces of network television’s version of flow. Even the network television tactic of airing re-runs when there is a lack of new programming found its way into the logic of PBS and HBO. While perhaps not to the same degree as they once did, these broadcasters will air programs multiple times over the course of a week or month. Early in its history, HBO did this so much so that many complaints

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about early pay-cable television were that the same programs and movies repeated over and over again (and even across channels). As this and previous chapters have demonstrated, diversity became the key to each cable channel’s success. In the case of HBO, to retain and increase its subscriber base, there was the move from sporting events and feature films to original productions – be they fictional dramas, magazine programming, or informational documentaries. It was this need to create original programming and a signature style that helped to set HBO apart from other competing pay-cable channels, and when pressed to find a model of programming to work with, HBO went with one that wound up looking a lot like PBS.

Today, HBO continues to set itself apart as a provider of culturally significant, critically acclaimed, and immensely popular content. This project’s examination of HBO’s shift toward producing more original content demonstrates that, in many ways, the type of programming and notions of cultural capital that were attributed to public television were emulated by HBO with varying degrees of success. This shift in HBO’s programming happened at a time when many cable channels also began to create “cultural programming” rather than simply “base entertainment.” Whether in response to, or fueling the fires of, the debates about the need for public television in a deregulated, market-based television lineup, HBO saw a niche and began to fill it. HBO’s cultural programming began to be more and more

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151 This was such a common complaint that an entire page of HBO’s programming guide sent monthly to subscribers was often focused on the question “Why Would I Want to Watch a Movie Six Times a Month?” The guide went on to note that this was actually a benefit to subscribers that had busy schedules and could watch a program at various times a day or subscribers who loved a particular movie and wanted to watch a film over and over again.
more socially committed and combined information and education with popular aesthetics and entertainment in ways that PBS had simply not been able to achieve.

Over the past two decades, HBO has distributed thought provoking, politically engaged, and controversial programming into American households and has often done so through popular televisual forms. Sometimes these programs come in the form of after-school specials or public service documentaries, and other times they come in the form of historical dramas or epic mini-series. These socially committed programs explore topics such as poverty and AIDS, the rights of women and minorities, or other global injustices. Of course, the limits of these critiques are determined in part by narrative and generic forms as well as the profit concerns and ideologies of those in charge of programming.

Unlike PBS, the balance between public service and profitability defines much of HBO’s commitment to informational and cultural programming, but it is in part the profitability and marketability that has caused HBO’s star to rise as filmmakers often take their projects to HBO rather than PBS in order to achieve more attention, money, and acclaim. While PBS may achieve a larger prime time rating than HBO due to its free accessibility to audiences without premium cable channels, it seems that HBO has taken over the role of tastemaker from PBS and used its informational and socially committed programming to market itself as the premiere distributor of cultural content. In the next chapter, I chart how HBO established and used its critical success in the creation and

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152 According to Neilson Media Research, PBS averaged a 1.3 prime time rating during the 2007-2008 season-to-date where HBO only averaged a 0.8 rating. HBO rated higher than other commercial channels that offer similar programming (except The History Channel which tied HBO). History Channel (0.8), Discovery Channel (0.7), CNN (0.7), The Learning Channel (0.6) and Bravo (0.4). PBS Website, accessed June 10, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs_corp.html>.
distribution of some of the most important AIDS media over the past two decades. I also explore the implications of what might appear to many as the wholesale privatization of public service television.
Chapter 5
Media Narratives Constructed: The AIDS Epidemic, Media Discourse, and HBO

In the first half of this dissertation, I argued that the tensions of profitability and public service have helped to shape television’s form and content from the medium’s inception. I also provided an historical context for the major shifts in public service television in the post-network era and made the case that HBO’s strategy to increase its production of original programming modeled itself, to a large degree, on the programming strategy of PBS. In the second half of this dissertation, my focus shifts to the ways in which post-network television, particularly HBO, responded to the AIDS epidemic. Television’s role in the medicalization of American culture cannot be understated. When it comes to medicine and disease, media clearly matters – in terms of our understanding and our response. In this chapter, I examine how discourse about the AIDS epidemic circulated through media and how AIDS media informed cultural practices and public policy. I bring together the work of cultural theorists and media scholars who have explored AIDS as a biological entity, a site of contestation, and the spark that lit a media firestorm in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Finally, I situate HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming within broader studies of AIDS media on television and in cinema and argue that HBO was a crucial producer and distributor of AIDS media – one that addressed the complexity of the epidemic in ways that were incompatible with the strategies of network television, PBS, or Hollywood cinema.

Over the past thirty years, AIDS has been conceptualized as the product of lived experience, medical practice, public policy, activist movements, and media coverage. When taken together, it becomes clear that what we now know as a thing called Acquired
Immunodeficiency Syndrome is not just a disease we have tried to cure. In fact, AIDS is not even a disease; it is a syndrome. One does not die from AIDS; one dies from AIDS-related illnesses. This complexity and multiplicity at the heart of a deadly set of biological events is also at the heart of the discourse that has been constructed around it. AIDS is therefore not a single, objectively knowable thing. It is the result of a particular grid of intelligibility, which allowed specific practices and phenomena to be rationalized and acted upon. As Douglas Crimp eloquently states:

AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections, or transmission routes. Least of all does it contest the reality of illness, suffering, and death. What it does contest is the notion that there is an underlying reality of AIDS, upon which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS. If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then hopefully we can recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them.153

It is through such a lens that we can attempt to understand AIDS as a discursive formation constructed by a variety of medical, cultural, and political forces.

AIDS, therefore, can be understood as the result of a public health system’s response to a variety of illnesses in diverse groups of patients in various geographical areas. It is the result of communities of people attempting to understand what was happening to them and then fighting to stay alive. It is the result of news media utilizing narrative practices to piece together individual experiences into a discernable sequence of events. It is the result of a political climate that chose to pursue an ideologically aligned response rather than the most effective response. AIDS has nothing in and of itself to do with sexual preference and sexual

identity, and yet it is entirely bound up with sexual politics and the history of gay rights.
Finally, it is the result of critical, theoretical, and compassionate responses to a plague that was killing a tremendous number of people.

We can best understand how the narrative of AIDS was constructed by looking to the scholars that deconstructed that narrative. It is with this in mind that I will recount the generally accepted narrative of AIDS: what the syndrome is, where it is believed to have come from, and the methods of prevention and treatment that are the most widely used. I will then work through the arguments of scholars who have succeeded in pushing forward our understanding of cultural discourses about AIDS. Finally, I spend the bulk of this chapter examining the media’s role in constructing this narrative by situating HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming in the broader history of AIDS media on network television, Hollywood cinema, and PBS.

The Generally Accepted Narrative of AIDS

To say that AIDS is one of the biggest problems facing our planet is not at all to risk overstating the issue. Beyond the threat to individual and public health, AIDS has long-lasting and far-reaching effects on population growth and economic prosperity. According to the World Health Organization and UNAIDS, in 2010, there were 33 million people living with AIDS worldwide. Of those, 2.6 million were newly infected in 2009, and there were 1.8 million AIDS deaths in 2009 alone. In total, the worldwide AIDS pandemic has taken
approximately 25 million lives.\textsuperscript{154} While HIV is indiscriminate in its infection, it is clear that certain populations in the developing world have been affected most severely. For example, of the 33 million people currently living with AIDS, 24.5 million of those were living in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The generally accepted narrative goes something like what follows. AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is caused by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), which, according to many scientists, crossed from primates into humans. The first cases of the current strains of HIV probably occurred in the 1930s, and the disease spread rapidly in the 1970s. On June 5, 1981 an article appeared in the Centers for Disease Control publication, \textit{Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report}. In this report, doctors recorded unexpected clusters of previously extremely rare diseases like Kaposi’s sarcoma and \textit{pneumocystis carinii}, stemming from immunosuppression in otherwise healthy patients. These diseases were present in a group of young, homosexual men and eventually became known as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency).

Soon enough, other “definable” groups were contracting these illnesses: hemophiliacs, blood transfusion recipients, and intravenous drug users. A year later, cases were appearing among the partners and infants of those affected. In July of 1982, the name AIDS was given to this syndrome, but it still wasn’t clear what the cause was. In 1983 the Pasteur Institute in France identified the virus that caused AIDS, and they called it Lymphadenopathy-Associated Virus (LAV). In April 1984 the National Cancer Institute isolated the virus and named it HTLV-III (Human T-cell Leukemia [Lymphotrophic] Virus

Famously, there was a controversy over which group rightfully discovered the virus, and so the compromise was to call it HIV.

Some of the earliest efforts to stop the spread of HIV are still the most practiced ones today. Protocols were put in place to test and monitor national blood supplies, and campaigns to encourage safe sex and safe injecting practices increased throughout much of the world. In a word, the overall method to contain the problem of AIDS has been education. While education campaigns have been tailored to specific groups and geographical areas and have had varying levels of success, treatment has had even more mixed results. Part of the reason for both of these is that there are different strains of the virus and different reasons for prevalence – essentially creating different epidemics. HIV subtypes are very unevenly distributed throughout the world, with the most widespread being subtypes A and C. Subtype A is predominant in West and Central Africa, with subtype A possibly also causing much of the Russian epidemic. Historically, subtype B has been the most common subtype in Europe, the Americas, Japan and Australia. Although this remains the case, other subtypes are becoming more frequent and now account for at least 25% of new infections in Europe. Subtype C is predominant in Southern and East Africa, India and Nepal and has caused the world's worst HIV epidemics (around half of all infections). There are, of course, other subtypes, and each subtype has various strains and mutations.155

In recent years, treatment is mainly through anti-retroviral drugs like AZT, protease inhibitors, and, increasingly more common, highly active cocktails of drugs. These drugs are quite expensive and must be taken in a very specific sequence, and though the price has come

155 This information is spread widely throughout the literature but has been usefully compiled in Alan Whiteside, A Very Short Introduction to HIV/AIDS (London: Oxford University Press, 2008).
down tremendously, they are still priced out of the hands of much of the developing world that so badly needs them. Despite the lack of anti-retroviral drugs flowing into the population, some countries have seen a substantial decline in prevalence. For example, Zimbabwe saw prevalence in pregnant women fall by several percentage points, and Senegal is seen as a model of successful prevention with its prevalence mostly remaining below 1%. Uganda saw the greatest reduction – HIV prevalence was 31% in pregnant women in 1990 and is now believed to be just 4.7%. While Haiti had the highest prevalence (6.2% of the total population in 1993), by 2006 it had dropped to 3.8%. Cuba has kept its prevalence consistently low (less than 0.1%). That being said, numbers in the Caribbean and Latin America are slowly rising overall, and in Eastern Europe the numbers are dramatically rising within the intravenous drug using population.\(^\text{156}\)

Just as levels of prevalence vary across the globe, the method of transmission is also not uniform worldwide. While AIDS may have first originated in central Africa, and was first discovered among gay populations in the United States, it has, through the increased mobility of our globalized world, affected populations worldwide to varying degrees, ignoring borders, nationalities, and attempts at claiming that it was a disease of the margins. As Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside write, “AIDS is the first epidemic of globalization. It has spread rapidly because of the massive acceleration of communication, the rapidity with which desire is reconstructed and marketed globally, and the flagrant inequality that exists within and between societies.”\(^\text{157}\) While the disease is absolutely global and has rendered the worst

\(^{156}\) Statistics from Whiteside, 2008 as well as the WHO and UNAIDS.

effects outside of the borders of the United States, our own struggles with HIV/AIDS have changed over the years.

While originally found to be most prevalent among homosexual men, IV drug users, and hemophiliacs, prevention and treatment efforts began to get off the ground only when AIDS began to spread through the heterosexual population of the United States. The increased efforts to fight AIDS prevented the U.S. from succumbing to the apocalyptically high prevalence that was once feared. That being said, the story of AIDS in the U.S. in some ways mirrors the global story. Populations most affected today in the U.S. are those often at the economic and social margins. By 2006, over 50% of new HIV diagnoses were among African Americans, and 72% of new HIV diagnoses in U.S. women were African American.158

That this narrative history has become widely accepted over the past thirty years is not to ignore the contested nature of each element of this story. Cultural approaches to medical knowledge have demonstrated that medical findings, discoveries, and analyses are always part of what Ludwig Fleck calls “thoughtstyles,” or what Michel Foucault would call a “discursive formation.”159 In what follows, I will provide an overview of how these thoughtstyles or discursive formations, and the assumptions embedded in them, have been sites of inquiry and contestation, scholarship and activism, and have shaped cultural understanding and media representations of the AIDS epidemic. This work comes from fields

of cultural theory, philosophy of science, political economy, and media studies and asks important questions central to any study of AIDS and AIDS media.

**Complicating The Generally Accepted Narrative of AIDS**

One of the earliest accounts of the spread of HIV/AIDS is Randy Shilts’ book, *And the Band Played On* (1987). In many ways, this is the narrative that many cultural theorists work to complicate, and it is important for that reason if none other. Of course Shilts’ account is more than just a whipping boy for most of the theoretical work to come after. It is a remarkably well-researched chronicle of the early epidemiological detective work, bureaucratic posturing, and community activism that shaped the first years of the AIDS epidemic. Shilts recounts how doctors and scientists went about initially determining that there was actually a single syndrome affecting a diverse group of patients and then isolating the virus that caused the patients’ immune systems to fail. By examining the way in which these early epidemiologists at the CDC pieced together their own theories of what constituted AIDS, it is possible to already begin to understand how a particular grid of intelligibility works to construct AIDS.

In addition to being a key work of history, *And the Band Played On* is also a passionate critique of public policy responses to AIDS. In his work, Shilts is highly critical of government agencies, the news media, and sections of the gay community for not addressing the crisis during the early years when there was more of a chance of containment (and even eradication). Shilts writes,
In those early years, the federal government viewed AIDS as a budget problem, local public health officials saw it as a political problem, gay leaders considered AIDS a public relations problem, and the news media regarded it as a homosexual problem that wouldn’t interest anybody else. Consequently, few confronted AIDS for what it was, a profoundly threatening medical crisis.  

As part of his 1980 presidential campaign of neoliberal economic policies and reform, President Reagan promised that federal programs would be turned over to the states. Unfortunately, his election and the subsequent slashing of federal budgets was right before a moment when a large and coordinated federal response could have possibly been the solution that would have overridden the infighting of local politics and legislative posturing that slowed down the fight against AIDS. The slow response to the crisis was disastrous, and it is well known that by May 31, 1987, the first time President Reagan said the word “AIDS” in public, over 36,000 Americans had already been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. 20,000 had died of AIDS-related illness.  

For as much as And the Band Played On is a decisive critique, it has received its own share of criticism. The book has often been criticized for its attack on the gay community and for Shilts’ treatment of Gaetan Dugas, the French-Canadian airline steward who was deemed “Patient Zero” by the media. Despite these criticisms, the book and the subsequent HBO film adaptation do not, as I will argue in the next chapter, spend very much time focusing on the role of Dugas, as both texts were far more interested in addressing the larger problem of government inaction. In many ways it was the news media that latched on to the Dugas story,  

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161 Shilts (1987), 596.
and, in fact, neither Shilts nor the CDC ever made the claim that he was the sole person responsible for bringing AIDS to the United States.

In the years following Shilts’ groundbreaking book, a number of theoretical works examined the cultural discourse of AIDS, and one of the most important was Steven Epstein’s *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (1996). His book follows the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Foucault in that he “shows how knowledge emerges out of credibility struggles – and how the unusual politicization of AIDS in the United States has altered the conduct and resolution of such struggles.” He divides his book into two parts, tackling the credibility struggles embedded in “The Politics of Causation” and “The Politics of Treatment.” The first part examines biomedical discourse that claims HIV to be the cause of AIDS and examines the alternative explanations that include other cofactors. He focuses on stories of causation and on the figures and institutions that are attached to them. The second section examines treatment strategies and the interests that motivate research into pharmaceuticals and prevention strategies. Like many of the theoretical interventions to come, Epstein focuses on the notion that “what we know about AIDS” is always a product of complex interactions, and he asks how credibility is conferred upon knowledge in academia, the media, and medicine. Because it was written during a time when decisions about what treatments qualified for experimental trials meant – quite literally – life or death for those with AIDS, he engages in the debate regarding who should be able to decide what scientific claims are credible and how that credibility is established.

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In particular, Epstein’s work is useful when thinking about protocols for pharmaceutical research and drug trials during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, as this was one of the key causes taken up by activist groups like ACT UP during the 1980s and early 1990s. In his analysis of the FDA’s approval processes for HIV drugs during this period, Epstein asks an important question: “How does a society reconcile competing commitments to scientific autonomy and participatory democracy?” Should science yield to the pressures of a clamoring public or should they rely on methods of lengthy double blind drug trials to ensure the safety of the drug. In fact, what do we even mean by “scientific autonomy?” How do we determine the acceptable levels of what is safe or what is not safe?

He borrows from Adele Clark and outlines five possible characteristics that suggest that a line of research will likely be controversial: if it has direct applications, if it challenges or threatens the natural order, if it is relevant to some politicized social issue, if sentiment has mobilized a related social movement, or if the research is in competition for scarce recourses. It is clear right away that HIV/AIDS is marked by all five of these characteristics, making AIDS research a constant site of tremendous contestation.

Epstein’s focus on credibility struggles responds nicely to Shilts’ And the Band Played On in that while it is now commonplace to categorically say that HIV causes AIDS (or to even simply call it “the AIDS virus”), the road to getting there was not at all simple. Epstein writes that the notion that AIDS “might be caused by a previously unknown virus was initially a relatively unpopular one.” Indeed, there were theories that AIDS could be the result of a lifestyle factor such as rampant sexual encounters leading to a weakened

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164 Ibid., 26.
immune system, the use of tainted amyl nitrate poppers, or a confluence of cofactors. Epstein argues that the debate was to close what Latour calls a “black box” – a debate about “when and how scientific controversies end.” He further writes that the debate is all at once “epistemological (When is causation proven?), methodological (How should rival theories be weighed and compared?), empirical (Was closure arrived at too early?), and political (Who decides? Which social actors are qualified or entitled to participate in the process of establishing scientific knowledge about AIDS?)”¹⁶⁵ These are all issues of debate present in the narrative of Shilts’ historical account, but they are unpacked and examined in Epstein’s theoretical work.

Working at the same time as Epstein, cultural theorist Paula Treichler argues in How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS (1999) that in addition to being biological and biomedical, AIDS is also very much a cultural and linguistic construction. She calls it an “epidemic of signification,” and she considers how

the AIDS epidemic helps us understand the complex relation between language and reality, between meanings and definitions – and how those relations help us understand AIDS and develop interventions that are more culturally informed and socially responsible.¹⁶⁶

Each chapter focuses on different instances of scientific or cultural discourse that make sense of the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS. She includes chapters on the early years of the discovery of AIDS, how AIDS is figured in the Third World, how AIDS is addressed in the media (news, television shows, magazines), and finally how we can establish meaningful theoretical interventions during the AIDS crisis.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 29-30.
¹⁶⁶ Treichler (1999), 4.
Treichler points out that while AIDS came at a time when scientific research in “biology, virology, and immunology could provide a foundation for an intensive research effort focused on AIDS,” this was also the time when “an apparatus of contemporary critical and cultural theory prepares us to analyze AIDS in relation to questions of language, representation, interpretation, narrative, ideology, social and intellectual difference, binary division, and contests for meaning.” Like Douglas Crimp, she maintains careful attention to the fact that “infection, sexually transmitted, disease, and virus” are also “linguistic constructs that generate meaning and simultaneously facilitate and constrain our ability to think and talk about material phenomena” without losing sight of the very real and material impact that those linguistic constructs have on real bodies and lives. In many ways the project of Treichler’s book is to examine biomedical discourse, popular discourse, and critical theory in order to understand how the intersection of all three impacted our lives during the AIDS epidemic.

As a student of Treichler, John Erni focuses on ideas of the curability and incurability of AIDS in his book *Unstable Frontiers: Technomedicine and the Cultural Politics of Curing AIDS* (1994). He examines the medical discourse surrounding AZT as the sole “magic bullet” to fight AIDS, and notes that, for better or worse, many other treatments were marginalized as medical science focused on AZT. He writes about AIDS activism and the biomedical profession by utilizing an approach that draws upon the work of Michel Foucault and British cultural studies, leaning heavily on the theoretical work of Treichler. He argues, “An analysis of the overall project of curing AIDS cannot be carried out without identifying such

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167 Treichler (1999), 2.
168 Ibid., 4.
languages, structures, practices, and fantasies by which the project itself is created.” He argues that in addition to the work done in the laboratories, it is in the abundant cultural discourse surrounding AIDS that “a technoethical consciousness about AIDS treatment has emerged, through which the politics of the control of the medicalized body is shaped.”

Like Treichler, Erni’s work examines these intersections for productive contradictions. He finds them internal to the perspective of the curability/incurability of AIDS, and he sees them as an essential part of the discourse, enacting a complex drama that maintains a perpetual sense of crisis. This lens enables Erni to “focus on how the collusion of scientific, media, and public health policy discourses produce contradictory narratives about the reality of AIDS treatment within a particular shifting historical conjuncture.” In fact, the story he lays out about the discovery of AZT follows a narrative that is very similar to the narrative of And the Band Played On: “1) The courage of the physician to go against the grain of current medical beliefs; 2) The rational balance between individual and public medical needs; 3) The image of an individual’s crusade in fighting bureaucracy; 4) The image of the government as a protector of general interest and as a reformer during critical times (centered on the FDA).” It is interesting to note that if one were to replace the CDC with the FDA, the story is essentially the same.

While the work of Epstein, Treichler, and Erni analyze the way in which the discourse during and after the naming of AIDS has had a tremendous impact on how we’ve come to understand AIDS, Cindy Patton’s Globalizing AIDS (2002) offers a unique way of

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171 Ibid., 3.
thinking about activist struggles before the name of AIDS was established. She does so not just to tell an untold history but to also think about how these strategies might be utilized in local struggles as they are currently enacted all over the globe. Patton writes, “Political economy and civil rights claims treat bodies after they have emerged as visibilities – workers, blacks, queers. Medical thoughtstyles form at least part of the screen through which unarticulated masses of protoplasm pass on their way to becoming bodies of a certain type, in a certain place.”

So in order to stand up and be counted, gay rights groups who were fighting to not be labeled as different and were striving for equality had to revert back to their difference as a minority to call for acknowledgement.

This prompts the question: what are the politics of promoting difference while at the same time promoting inclusion and assimilation? Patton writes,

Organizing before The Name was in many ways the most grotesquely essentialist form of organizing imaginable: a brilliant and painful example of what political commentators now call “strategic essentialism.” In those days, attaining visibility was crucial. We were desperate to ensure that unrecognized people did not simply disappear, uncounted, dead from an unnamed medical syndrome with an unknown cause. We had to prove we existed in order to prove people were dying.

While equal treatment and protection under the law are necessary goals, the method often used is one of creating a social category that is different in some way from the dominant group and therefore deserves special, or at least additional, consideration. This further strengthens any borders of difference rather than promoting the interrelatedness of those groups (our common humanity, etc.).

By looking simultaneously at medical thoughtstyles and the trajectories of activism and policy through local and global communities [one can] shed light on why a ‘global solution’ may be impossible and why the legacies of colonialism and modernization allow for the spectacular and insidious recycling of racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic ideas as though they were ‘scientific.”175

She details two thoughtstyles: tropical thought and epidemiological thought. She notes, “A tropical disease was understood to be proper to a place, to a there, but only to operate as disease when it afflicted people from here. Pathogens in a locale were recorded in medical history mainly when they appeared as disease in a colonist’s body.”176 In fact, “The first world body was seen as the proper gauge of health; the Third World is the location of disease.”177 On the other hand, “Epidemiology told the story of pathogens not of bodies or places. Germs were believed to be everywhere, and an epidemic was seen as more cases of a disease than was expected. This could only be seen against the backdrop of a healthy population.”178 Since pathogens had to be carried by a body, epidemiology was a matter of time-space, not place. Epidemiology was focused on the vectors of movement of the pathogens. Patton notes that even today, the tropical model is relied upon in the realm of global health funding while disease surveillance done by the WHO and the CDC still relies on the epidemiological model.

We can see both of these thoughtstyles represented at different times in the history of AIDS media, and in particular in HBO’s programming over the years. We see the tropical thoughtstyle at work in programs that focus on how AIDS has impacted non-Western populations in particular geographic locations or economic circumstances. In these cases

175 Patton (2002), xxvi.
176 Patton (2002), 35.
177 Ibid., 36.
178 Ibid., 39.
discussion is not of viruses and epidemiology but rather material conditions. On the other hand, programs that focus on AIDS in Western countries often utilize epidemiological thoughtstyles where populations are at risk from dangerous viral agents, must protect themselves accordingly, and are figured as being in a race against time before the disease reaches critical mass.

In one of Patton’s major theoretical moves, she calls for a “kind of postmodern research discipline that would resort neither to the palpable but corrupt geopolitical spatialization of tropical thinking, nor to the incorporeal temporalizing of epidemiology.” Rather than relying on these two thoughtstyles or simply playing them against each other and working in the interstices, she argues that we need to reconsider what we mean by either local or global initiatives and how our activism can be best channeled. She points to the same theme that many of these authors point to: we are absolutely interconnected while at the same time involved in very individual and localized experiences. The question remains: how do we create policy, foster activism, establish and maintain community, and work toward finding relief from this epidemic while neither ignoring difference of experience nor becoming blind to a common struggle? It is exactly this question that several of the most recent HBO programs ask. While not always providing answers, these programs provide us with multiple avenues for solutions. It is also true that the solutions offered are often those in line with a neoliberal economic model and the logic of governmentality, and in order to properly analyze and critique these solutions, a political economic approach must also be included.

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Ibid., 114.
Because a global understanding may leave out the ways in which local situations are so vastly different, political economy scholars have taken up the issue of HIV/AIDS over the last five to ten years, especially as nations and international organizations have ramped up their efforts to fight this problem. Scholars have examined the response of the World Bank Multi Country AIDS Program (World Bank MAP), the United Nations’ Global Fund Against Tuberculosis, AIDS, and Malaria (GFTAM), and the United States’ President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) created under the second Bush administration. These efforts have dramatically increased the funding of prevention and treatment strategies across the globe. Integral to these plans is the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which has important implications for the production of anti-retroviral drugs used to treat HIV-positive patients or patients with AIDS.

Scholars of political economy who approach the issue of HIV/AIDS offer productive ways to understand how and why certain prevention and treatment strategies are implemented and to also offer insight into why some work while others have failed. In addition to scholars of biomedicine who focus on epidemiological approaches to fighting this problem, or cultural theorists who examine scientific and cultural discourse, scholars of political economy add valuable understanding of the social and political issues (locally and

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globally) that contribute to the spread of AIDS and the difficulty in containing and eradicating it.

With nearly 75% of HIV-positive individuals on the entire planet living in Sub-Saharan Africa, the epidemic has become one of the leading killers on the African continent. Because AIDS in Africa is primarily transmitted through sex, those affected are often those sexually active and in the early to middle years of their lifespan, creating a tremendous impact on development. As Nana K. Poku writes, “In both men and women, the virus is impacting heaviest on the most productive sectors of African economies – prime-aged adults – robbing these already besieged economies of scarce skills, children of their parents, and a continent of a generation in their prime of their working lives.”\(^\text{181}\) Of course, dealing with this massive public health issue takes tremendous resources from nations already burdened by structural indebtedness. Poku continues, “Herein lies Africa’s predicament: on the one hand, how to respond effectively to the multiple demands of HIV/AIDS, whilst on the other, struggling with a debt overhang which is undermining investments in social welfare.”\(^\text{182}\)

It is not just debt that is hindering many countries from fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS. Many developing countries, and particularly those in eastern and Sub-Saharan Africa, lack the basic infrastructure to administer public health programs. Without the resources to implement prevention and treatment campaigns, those populations who are already at risk of poverty, malnourishment, and infectious disease only have their problems exponentially complicated by a syndrome that effectively wipes out their already fragile


\(^\text{182}\) Poku (2004), 33.
immune system. Those nations who have the resources to maintain even the most basic public health infrastructure, much less produce cheap, generic ARVs, are already doing much better than those nations who are struggling to even provide clean water and basic medical care to their populations. While the above mentioned efforts like World Bank MAP, GFTAM, and PEPFAR are contributing vast amounts of resources where there was once little to none, these core problems of structural indebtedness, poverty, and lack of a functioning health care infrastructure mitigate the potential of these efforts. It is in HBO films like *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* and *The Lazarus Effect* (2010) that we see the results (both good and bad) of these economic policies.

When examining AIDS media, one final study worth mentioning for its approach is Priscilla Wald’s *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2007). In this book, Wald focuses on narratives of contagion and argues, “the interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community… [and] disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic of human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact.” Her book examines contagion narratives across history and across different media. When it comes to AIDS, she contrasts the approaches of cultural theorists like Steven Epstein and Paula Treichler against journalists like Randy Shilts, arguing that the approaches of the first group say that AIDS, in many ways, does not exist outside of the practices that conceptualize it, whereas Shilts’ narrative is one that contributed to the very existence of the AIDS narrative.

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In a very useful observation, she notes the use of “heroic epidemiologists” in contagion narratives, suggesting that after *And The Band Played On*, there is not a lot of artistic output about viral agency in HIV/AIDS narratives. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, books and movies about epidemiological detective work were incredibly popular. By the late 1990s, though, the story is often more about heroism of afflicted individuals or human suffering or the human spirit rather than epidemiologic detective stories. She notes that in a narrative like *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993), AIDS already operates in the service of broader social commentary. These narratives become very clear when examining HBO’s HIV/AIDS productions over the past twenty years as we see televisual efforts to maintain the health of the U.S. population align with a broader neoliberal response to the AIDS epidemic.

Clearly, there are a number of approaches to studying the AIDS epidemic and AIDS media. No one approach, whether journalistic, biological, cultural, or political/economic offers a complete picture of the complexities of AIDS or its impact on society. This, of course, suggests that this project’s approach to studying HBO’s AIDS programming must necessarily draw upon a variety of intellectual traditions and methods of analysis. It is with this work in mind that I now focus on the role of media in the construction of AIDS as a discursive formation. It is clear that news media, network television, and Hollywood cinema played a large role in the public’s understanding of the AIDS epidemic and also in the responses of activist groups, the medical community, and those in charge of public policy. What gets ignored in AIDS media literature is the significant contribution that HBO made over the course of two decades and over twenty programs. For the first time in scholarly
studies of AIDS media, I have brought many of these programs into the conversation. Through archival research and textual analysis, I provide a history of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programs and situate them appropriately within analyses of cultural discourse about AIDS, media representations of AIDS, and the history of HBO as a media institution.

**AIDS Films: Network Television and Hollywood Cinema**

Just as news media understood and depicted AIDS as an epidemic that spread from the margins to the general population, the entertainment industry followed a similar pattern as AIDS slowly made its way into popular television series, made-for-TV movies, and eventually Hollywood films. The characters with AIDS in these programs mimic this trajectory as they were first largely figured as homosexual men and IV drug users, then as hemophiliacs, and then finally as heterosexual men and women. Importantly, the trajectory of these films was not simply a reflection of reality, but a construction of media discourse that reported, interpreted, and dramatized an evolving situation in ways that often fit social anxieties, cultural values, and political ideology. As Stuart Hall writes, “Cinema and media are not a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak.”

The narrative established by journalistic practices informed these popular media representations, but these media representations also helped to reinforce this narrative in the public imagination – creating and shaping ways of understanding AIDS and how to respond to the growing epidemic. It is therefore important to

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briefly explore these popular media forms to have a better understanding of cultural
discourse about AIDS, and, for the purposes of this project, to better contextualize HBO’s
own HIV/AIDS programming in a broader televisual framework.

The year 1985 saw the NBC broadcast of *An Early Frost*, the first made-for-TV
movie about AIDS. *An Early Frost* starred Aidan Quinn as Michael, a middle-aged gay man
who contracts HIV and who subsequently comes out to his family as a gay man and as a
person with AIDS. *An Early Frost* is a story about individuals and does not allude to larger
struggles to fight prejudice, educate the public, or increase funding to fight the disease. Much
of the conflict in the film comes from dealing with misconceptions about how one might
contract AIDS, as Michael’s family members are scared to even be in the same room with
him. Airing two years before AIDS exploded in the media, this film set a template for
acceptable, mainstream representations of AIDS in the 1980s – as something dangerous and
scary that mostly afflicted gay men but also a narrative catalyst for heartwarming and
sentimental entertainment for a mass audience. Four years later, in the critically acclaimed
ABC made-for-television movie, *The Ryan White Story* (1989), the character focus shifted,
but the sentimental tone and implicit “it could happen to you” warning remained. Telling the
story of a young boy who contracts HIV through a blood transfusion, this film opened the
doors for a number of made-for-television movies based on true stories of young people who
contracted AIDS through the blood supply – a trope that became so common as to become
cliché.185

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185 For a detailed study of these early AIDS-related films, see Frank Pilipp and Charles Shull,
“American Values and Images: TV Movies and the First Decade of AIDS,” *Journal of Popular Film
Paula Treichler’s description of the takeaway from *An Early Frost* could easily be used for many of the HIV/AIDS programs in the years to come. She writes, “*An Early Frost* represents Western liberal humanism doing what it does best: arguing for compassion, reason, compliance with scientific authority, common sense.”186 *An Early Frost* also provides us with a prototype for how television is used as a governmental technology during this period of the epidemic. Like this early made-for-TV AIDS film, a great deal of these HIV/AIDS programs do more than represent liberal humanism. They guide and instruct audiences (i.e. the population), informing them about safe sex practices and how to manage their private health decisions in the face of a terrible epidemic. It is important to remember that without a cure in sight and with very little known about HIV/AIDS, these television programs worked in part to keep the public calm and avoid a mass panic. Television taught its audience that AIDS is part of their new reality, and that they must learn how to live with it with each other. At a time when the population was afraid of this “gay plague,” and mainstream media outlets were afraid to discuss it with any level of complexity, these programs (particularly dramatic programs) helped to keep the public rational. As potential violence against people with AIDS was increasingly feared, we can see television dramas as a way to latch on to that liberal humanism and compassion that Treichler describes. One could see how audiences may become attached to fictional characters in ways that documentaries and news stories may not provide. As fictional lead characters in these dramas, they are often attractive, beloved, and presented in their best light. Before they become sick, audiences are invited to identify with the character so that when they watch him

186 Treichler (1999), 190.
(it was almost always a male) die of AIDS, that identification easily turns into empathy – sidestepping whatever stigmas were foolishly attached to AIDS at the time.

Moreover, these films provided a great deal of basic information that audiences may have either ignored or been too ashamed to seek out in other forms. Beyond reiterating the importance of safe sex or safe injecting practices, the audiences were given an historical and scientific lesson about the nature of HIV, in some ways making up for the lack of a large-scale and coordinated information campaign from the U.S. Public Health Service. With no such federal effort at this time, it was up to television and cinema to reach the broad population beyond what local community efforts could do.

After several years of television tackling the AIDS epidemic through evening news reports and “special episodes” of various television series, Hollywood cinema took its turn. In 1989, Longtime Companion was released in theaters and is widely considered to be “the first American film about AIDS to circulate widely in mainstream culture.”¹⁸⁷ The film recounts the early years of the AIDS epidemic, beginning with the first mention in The New York Times of a “mysterious gay cancer” on July 3, 1981. After the loss of several characters to AIDS, the film ends with many of the remaining characters working for Gay Men’s Health Crisis in the summer of 1989. In the first scenes, the characters are spending their summer on New York’s Fire Island and enjoying the pleasures of an upper-middle class lifestyle until AIDS tragically turns their world upside down. Unlike the made-for-television films that came before it, Longtime Companion was able to explore the experience of taking care of an AIDS patient without sparing the audience the more demanding moments of suffering and

agony. If death and disease had been sanitized to a certain extent on television movies like *An Early Frost*, this film provided a more realistic glimpse at just how devastating AIDS could be.

Lindsay Law, executive producer of PBS’s *American Playhouse*, financed the film for $1.5 million dollars, and the film’s pedigree helps to contextualize its mode of address. When one considers the themes and aesthetics of other *American Playhouse* productions such as *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1984) or *Tales of the City* (1993), this film would nicely fit within the series. *Longtime Companion* maintains a made-for-television aesthetic while its theatrical distribution provided the opportunity to push the boundaries of artistic expression beyond the representational template of television AIDS media. In fact, the *American Playhouse* series was to become no stranger to HIV/AIDS programming. In the years after *Longtime Companion*, Lindsey Law helped to usher in the broadcasts of *Andre’s Mother* (1990), a film about a mother who gets to know her son’s former lover after her son dies of AIDS, and *In the Wings: “Angels in America” on Broadway* (1993), a behind-the-scenes look at the play’s Broadway run. John J. O’Connor writes in his review of *Andre’s Mother*, “There are certain programs that vividly illustrate why public television can be indispensable. *Andre’s Mother* is one.” The sensibilities that informed *Longtime Companion* can be seen, at least in part, as an extension of the work that Lindsay Law did with *American Playhouse* and can help us to understand the mode of address taken by this first example of mainstream AIDS cinema.

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*Longtime Companion* was well received and won a number of awards including the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, but despite the awards and good reviews, the film was not without critique. David Roman writes that some critics in the gay community “castigated the film’s gender and racial representational politics for misrepresenting AIDS and for valorizing white gay men’s lives over the lives of racial minorities, intravenous drug users, and women with HIV.”  

He also notes that even the white gay men on screen were seen as mostly one-dimensional. He writes, “Except for Sean and David, the older couple, who were seen as fleshed-out individuals with fully developed characterizations, critics perceived the other characters as interchangeable stereotypes.”  

Not only were the representations often considered stereotypical, gay male sexuality was rendered nearly invisible aside from a few kisses and embraces. Still, these kisses, and even bare bottoms, were far, far more than what *An Early Frost* had provided on television.  

The charges leveled at *Longtime Companion* would be common for mainstream AIDS films of this time period, and critics would be given more fuel for their fire upon the release of Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* in 1993. Certainly the biggest Hollywood film to date to explicitly deal with AIDS, Kylo-Patrick Hart writes of the film,  

> Although the presence of popular actors Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas… was intended to lure hordes of straight viewers to sit through an AIDS movie and to make their introduction to the realities of modern gay life palatable, the representation of gay male sexuality in this offering remains largely at the level of television-movie like touches.

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189 Roman (2006), 286-287.
190 Ibid., 289.
At this stage, the primary criticism of popular AIDS media was that television and cinema largely treated AIDS as a gay disease and did so while also representing gay male sexuality as stereotypical at best, or invisible at worst. This meant that not only were these representations not true to life, they were sometimes even harmful and dangerous. In the case of *Philadelphia*, although the main character is ostensibly Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), the lawyer who was terminated from his job when his employers began to suspect that he had AIDS, Andrew never becomes a fully fleshed out character. By the end of the film, the viewer knows very little about him other than the fact that he’s a brilliant lawyer, loves opera, and has an incredibly dedicated partner Miguel (Antonio Banderas) who stuck with Andrew even after Andrew cheated on him. On the other hand, Andrew’s initially homophobic lawyer, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), is given the majority of the screen-time, has a fully fleshed out character arc, and is figured as the character with whom the cautious but curious mainstream (i.e. heterosexual) audience is meant to identify.

Even Joe’s initial homophobia is not beyond the pale. As Robert J. Corber writes, Joe’s homophobia is visceral rather than ideological, which makes identifying with him less threatening for male heterosexual spectators who might share his aversion to homosexuality but see the Reaganite scapegoating of gay men as extremist.”¹⁹² Instead, viewers are able to continue to identify with the hero of the story because his homophobia is like their own. “In locating the source of national homophobia solely in individuals rather than the institutions and practices of national identity, the film suggests that it can be eradicated on an interpersonal level.” Like many other AIDS films and television programs during this time

(particularly as we later enter the multiculturalism of the Clinton-era 1990s), one of the primary themes is that acceptance of difference is appropriate citizenship.

Although An Early Frost and Longtime Companion toned down gay sexuality (Paula Treichler calls the language in the former “almost Victorian”), these were at least stories told from the point of view of their gay characters.\textsuperscript{193} Philadelphia was a considerably larger film with bigger stars, a bigger budget, and a wider release. In order to make a return on investment and successfully get across its message, the film essentially became a straight person’s AIDS movie. When homosexuality was discussed, there were appropriate sign posts along the way – taking the straight audience into unfamiliar territory but never letting things get too out of hand. Corber writes, “The film’s ideological project, in other words, seems to require a dequeering, or normalization, of gay identity.”\textsuperscript{194}

It is clear that this method of “dequeering” the character and the film is due to several things. First, the casting of “everyman” actor Tom Hanks in the lead role works to provide familiarity and perhaps fails to create a suspension of disbelief about Hanks’ heterosexuality as he inhabits the role. Second, the relationship between Andrew and Miguel is rendered as loving and compassionate but never sexual. In fact, the first time that Miguel is introduced, Andrew’s back is to the camera so that the viewer does not even see the on-screen kiss. Finally, the viewer is not immersed in a queer lifestyle or queer worldview. Instead, the film becomes a courtroom drama focusing on the flawed but heroic Joe, as he wins the case and gives the audience a sense that in America, everyone is treated equally under the law. The apparent blindness of justice allows for blindness to (or at least a disavowal of) the practice

\textsuperscript{193} Treicher (1999), 191.
\textsuperscript{194} Corber (2003), 116.
of gay male sexuality that, in the mind of the public and in the discourse of the media, was so directly linked to AIDS.

The overall effect of this “dequeering” is that Andrew is a character that can evoke sympathy and a desire for social justice in the audience. Corber writes,

In the film, homosexuality does not become socially significant until it is rendered visible by AIDS. In attempting to instill in heterosexual spectators feelings about gay men that are less divisive than those incited by Reaganism, the film inadvertently acknowledges the difficulty of deploying sentimentality in relation to gays. For heterosexual spectators to identify with Andy, he must first be desexualized.195

Situating *Philadelphia* within a neoconservative Reaganite America, Corber sees the film relying on sentimentality and appealing to liberal notions equality, civil rights, and reasonable debate rather than the type of activism made famous by ACTUP. In order to get the message across, gay male sexuality had to no longer be part of the equation. The appeal was made via the universality of human rights and not the specificity of prejudices against homosexual culture. He writes,

Partly because of AIDS, homosexuality emerged as an abjected site of displacement for national anxieties about the breakdown of the family and the loss of morality. To reposition gays in relation to the discourses and practices of American national identity, discourses and practices that promise to liberate them from the social negativity of the stereotype by returning them to an unmarked body, or rather a body whose markings have no political or social significance, Demme’s film minimizes the differences between them and heterosexuals.196

As the biggest-budget Hollywood AIDS film to date, *Philadelphia* walked a fine line between conveying its message to a national audience with the hopes of raising awareness and promoting ethical spectatorship and, conversely, alienating the very audience that it wished to address. By whitewashing the complexity of an epidemic that had different

195 Ibid., 116.
meanings to different groups affected by it, AIDS in *Philadelphia* became part of the national fabric just as civil rights had before it – as something that the nation could absorb and deal with through existing systems and not through individual or collective activism. That said, the film also addresses the viewer on an individual level, calling for a neoliberal self-policing of prejudice.

It was clear that commercial television and Hollywood cinema were not the venue for AIDS to be represented in ways that addressed queer sexuality. Over time, AIDS media became less linked to homosexuality but still had difficulty escaping the clichés and pitfalls of the earliest made-for-television films. Even when basic cable television got in on the game, the results were no different. In *A Mother’s Prayer* (1995), made for the USA Network, Linda Hamilton plays a widowed mother who discovers that she is HIV-positive and must find a family who will take care of her son after she dies. With a stunt-casted RuPaul as a social worker, this made-for-cable film pushes no envelopes and merely relies on old tropes for the sake of sentimentality. While independent filmmakers, particularly those attached to New Queer Cinema, would soon create AIDS films that dealt with gay and lesbian sexuality quite frankly, these early years of television and mainstream cinema represented AIDS in ways that were safe.¹⁹⁷ They were also indicative of the media’s narrative of who people with AIDS were and the marginal pockets of society in which they resided.

AIDS Films: Independent Filmmaking

Somewhere in between network television and Hollywood cinema are a number of other productions made during these early years of the AIDS epidemic. Some were made for subscription cable television like HBO and Showtime, and some were made for independent and art-house theaters. Others, like the tremendous output of AIDS videotapes made in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, were meant for small-scale community distribution and are beyond the scope of this project. Several productions that did not get a wide release on either television or in theaters are still important to note due to their connections to cable and public television. They are also important because they arrive before the media explosion of 1987 and are the touchstone AIDS films to which many of the later works respond. So before exploring the HIV/AIDS programming on PBS and HBO, I will briefly mention four independently made films that help to set the stage for an analysis of those productions.

In 1984, a year before American network television would broadcast *An Early Frost*, Stuart Marshall’s video, *Bright Eyes*, aired on Britain’s Channel Four as part of its *Eleventh Hour* series. The video uses documentary footage, reenactments, and dramatic scenes to jump back and forth between three moments in history: a reading of *The Lancet* medical journal in 1893, the genocide of Nazi Germany, and the present day treatment of people with AIDS – deconstructing how the media uses disease and fear to oppress and even criminalize gay sexuality. While network television would certainly never find itself broadcasting non-narrative, experimental AIDS programming of this kind, PBS would enter this realm with

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198 These tapes have been the subject of a number of well-research books including Juhasz (1995) and Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
certain entries in its *P.O.V.* series. *Bright Eyes*, however, only aired on British public television once and was never picked up by PBS.

In 1985, Arthur J. Bressan Jr.’s independent film, *Buddies*, was released and was the first theatrically released feature film to tackle the issue of AIDS. Though it was released four years before *Longtime Companion*, *Buddies* did not see nearly as wide of a release and was mainly shown in a few art-house theaters in urban areas of the United States. Quickly written and shot in a matter of weeks, the film focuses on an AIDS patient and the volunteer who visits and cares for him. The passion and purpose that brought the film together shows through on screen, as the message is quite clear: raise awareness and raise money because this is killing us.

The following year saw the release of Bill Sherwood’s *Parting Glances* (1986), a film that shares the sensibilities and aesthetic of the films of New Queer Cinema that would come in the early 1990s. While it’s true that one character, Nick, (played by Steve Buschemi) has AIDS, it is hard to call it an AIDS film in the same way that these others are. In fact, in her discussion of mainstream AIDS films on television and in cinema, Paula Treichler says that it’s not really “about” AIDS.\(^{199}\) On the other hand, we can follow Monica B. Pearl’s line of thinking where she writes that even though not all New Queer Cinema films take AIDS as their subject, they are “a form and expression that emerges from the cataclysm of AIDS in the Western world.”\(^{200}\) Essentially, this film is about the pleasures, heartaches, and politics of life in New York in the 1980s. While many aspects are particular to gay life in the 1980s, the sense is that the gay characters are not meant to be read simply as gay – they are meant to be

\(^{199}\) Treichler (1999), 181.

\(^{200}\) Pearl (2004), 24.
read as complex human beings living in a rapidly changing world, not the least of reasons for this change being the effects of the AIDS epidemic. For the characters in Parting Glances, the primary concern is an accelerated sense of time. What have they done with their time? What are they doing with it now? How much of it do they have left?

For Nick, these questions are brought to bear most clearly as he is spending much of his time thinking about how to wrap up the life he is living – creating his will on a videotape, trying to give away his things, and dealing with his one true love being in a relationship with another man. Aside from the existential concerns, the effects of Nick’s battle with AIDS are rendered invisible. Other than being noticeably thin (thanks in part to Buschemi’s small frame), he has no signs of AIDS-related illness and is able to get around quite well on his own. While the viewer does potentially see the effects of his medication (or quite possibly just his own coming to terms with mortality) in the strange fantasy sequences of an old friend visiting him in full knight’s battle armor, we do not see the illness taking its toll on his body as we do later in films such as Longtime Companion, Philadelphia, or the similarly fantasy-oriented Angels in America.

Emanuel Levy writes of the film, “[Bill] Sherwood makes Nick the moral center, the suffering spirit of modern gay life, the proud, unrepentant person with AIDS.”²⁰¹ Nick is not treated as a helpless victim, but rather as someone who has really lived and is not going to quit living without a fight. Unlike the more maudlin dramas of this time period, gay male sexuality is treated as playful – like what would be found in any mainstream romantic comedy. Parting Glances is not a made-for-television “message film,” nor is it an angry and


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resistant AIDS video. It is an AIDS film that feels ahead of its time and would likely have
had broader distribution had it been come out just a few years later as part of the New Queer
Cinema cohort. Unfortunately, director Bill Sherwood died of AIDS in 1990 and was unable
to see the batch of filmmakers that would have surely felt like kindred spirits for their playful
tone and complexity.

One of the financiers of Parting Glances was William M. Hoffman whose play, As Is,
was adapted into a made-for-cable film in 1986. As Is tells the story of ex-lovers Rich
(Robert Carradine) and Saul (Jonathan Hadary) who are reunited after Rich learns that he has
AIDS. Directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, As Is aired on Showtime and won a CableACE
award. The film’s distribution on subscription cable television as opposed to network
television, PBS, or theatrical release provided an opportunity to explore gay male sexuality
and the feelings of anger and hopelessness often associated with AIDS in ways that did not
have to be concerned primarily with commercial ramifications. In his review of the film,
Stephen Farber writes, “Television has already addressed the subject of AIDS, and several
television dramas have focused on homosexuality, but perhaps none have done so as
explicitly as As Is.” Released as part of the “Broadway on Showtime” series at a time
when Showtime, like other cable television channels were producing filmed theater, the
producers opted to adapt it as a film rather than videotaping a stage performance.

202 Michael Lindsay-Hogg was known as a documentary film and theater director and had previously
directed The Beatles in Let it Be (1970) and a stage production of Larry Kramer’s The Normal Heart
in London.
203 Stephen Farber, “Film Version of ‘As Is,’ AIDS Drama, To Be On TV,” The New York Times,
July 16, 1986.
Interestingly, despite the freedom provided by Showtime, *As Is* was even preceded by a disclaimer about its sexual content and language. Showtime’s senior vice-president Allen Sabinson was quoted as saying,

*As Is* is probably the frankest treatment of homosexual life style ever seen on television… Some of our executives were nervous about doing this play, but before the film airs, we will inform people that it is rough in subject matter and language. The whole philosophy behind pay cable is that subscribers make a choice. 204

The amount of profanity used in the play was toned down with the approval of playwright Hoffman who stated, “Four-letter words offend some people tremendously, and we didn’t want to risk losing those people who might benefit from what the piece was saying.” 205

While the language was toned down, the film did not shy away from its main focus on the emotional gauntlet that lovers had to face when dealing with AIDS – treating the situation with far more complexity than earlier films like *An Early Frost* or *Parting Glances* or even a later film like *Philadelphia*. Hoffman notes,

I thought NBC’s film about AIDS, *An Early Frost*, was terrific. But they had to do a lot of tightrope-walking. They couldn't really present AIDS from the protagonist's point of view. They had to present it from the family's point of view or society's point of view. They didn't really get into the full emotional life of two male lovers. My play is much more about the two guys. 206

As the producers of a network television film like *An Early Frost* knew that valuable prime-time space was not often given to AIDS films, it had to be used the best (i.e. broadest) possible way to transmit information, be attentive to the needs of various groups, and above all not offend or create too much controversy for networks or advertisers. 207 Showtime did

204 Farber (1986)
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 A similar argument could be made for Jonathan Demme’s treatment of *Philadelphia*. 

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not have the same concerns and could get away with producing a film based on a small but provocative play.

As Hoffman began to write the play in 1982, much of the script focuses on the anger and frustration brought about by the disease’s mystery. Questions such as “How did I get AIDS? How do I avoid giving it to others? What can be done? How long will I live?” are left unanswered and are not used for a quick public service announcement. As television critic Noel Holston wrote,

The AIDS victim in An Early Frost, the acclaimed public-service drama that NBC televised last fall, was gay, but he was a gay Jack Armstrong, an all-American boy. If this justly blasted a stereotype, it also suggested that the writers had little faith in the mass audience's capacity for understanding. Unlike the protagonist of An Early Frost, a monogamous sort who caught AIDS by way of his longtime roommate's infidelity, Hoffman's Richard (played by Robert Carradine) is restless, a compulsive cruiser. Saul (Jonathan Hadary), the longtime lover whom Richard is “divorcing” as the play opens, is the settled one who loved their comfortable, predictable life together.

Airing soon after a Supreme Court decision upholding state sodomy laws, Sabinson also noted, “That makes the program only more valuable. A film that presents a gay couple in very human terms may lead people to engage in some very interesting dialogue with regard to the recent Supreme Court decision.” While refraining from being didactic, As Is addresses a number of issues without addressing them as “issues.” For example, in the final scenes in the hospital, it’s impossible to not see the film wrestling with end of life issues, gay marriage issues, and issues relating to the rights of gay partners when being involved in medical decisions.

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209 Farber (1986)
Also in the final scenes, one of the most radical moments of all early mainstream AIDS media appears as the two former lovers discuss the possibility of making love. While they spent most of the film avoiding the issue and refusing to have (even protected) sex after learning of the AIDS diagnosis, in the final scene, Rich and Saul discuss the possibility of having sex in the hospital room as long as they take the right precautions. Unsure of what those precautions are or even what act of intimacy they might practice, the film leaves open the possibility that a person with AIDS does not automatically have to relinquish all traces of sexuality.

In the example of *As Is*, we see much of the same logic at work that we see with many of HBO’s HIV/AIDS productions. There is often passionate support of these AIDS projects by the producers and a sense of the moral imperative for cable television to produce AIDS media that accounts for the complexity of the issue in ways that other forms of television or film cannot. At the same time, these productions are part of a discourse about cable television’s ability to provide public service and cultural programming by partnering with various organizations and non-profits in conjunction with their original cable productions. In the case of *As Is*, Showtime partnered with the nonprofit National AIDS Network to host fundraiser screenings of the film around the country with the proceeds going to fund AIDS awareness and education programs.\(^{210}\) As I will point out, similar partnerships were common for HBO as well. Finally, there is a sense at this time that cable television can, in ways that

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network television absolutely cannot, offer content that is edgy, risqué, sensational, and “realistic.”

It becomes clear that while network television and Hollywood cinema were unable to address the complexity of AIDS or gay male sexuality in ways that were antithetical to a mainstream, commercially-oriented format, it was independent filmmaking that was able to take those risks. As we’ve seen, a handful of these films were released theatrically, and others found their way to public television and cable television. In the rest of this chapter, I examine how PBS and HBO addressed the AIDS epidemic from the early years to the present. While many of these programs were dramatic accounts of AIDS meant to entertain, others were documentaries of an informational or personal variety that would not easily find a home in mainstream commercial culture.211

AIDS Media: PBS

While network television and mainstream Hollywood cinema treated AIDS in ways that were often sanitized for advertisers or the film-going audience, PBS proved itself capable of sometimes addressing AIDS in a more nuanced way that did not have appeal to market tastes. That being said, the HIV/AIDS programs that aired on PBS received their fair share of criticism from all sides – those who thought they went too far and those who thought they didn’t go far enough. As I noted in chapters two and three, PBS has long had a history of providing educational programming, informing the television audience, cultivating civic

211 That is not to say that HBO is not “mainstream” or “commercial,” but that due to its subscription-based economic structure, it must be treated, in some ways, outside of a typical commercial framework that relies on advertiser support or box-office success.
democracy, and doing all of this within a particular mode of address. It should not come as a surprise that PBS would apply the same sensibilities to many of their HIV/AIDS programs.

Long before the AIDS epidemic, however, PBS had an established history of creating programming that addressed controversial subjects, including topics of sexuality and disease, and it did so in ways that might be surprising. For example, *VD Blues* (1972) found PBS attempting to use popular aesthetics to approach the topic of venereal disease. The program incorporated slang, skits, folk songs, humor, and frank talk and was considered by *Time Magazine* to be “outspoken even by the more liberal standards of public television.”

*VD Blues* demonstrated the potential of public television that is unfortunately not always achieved. Attempts at reaching audiences through these methods show up from time to time on PBS but are generally cast aside for a tone that more typically follows the conventions of investigative journalism. As one might imagine, very few of PBS’s HIV/AIDS programs were praised for their entertainment values, but when they did receive positive criticism it was for their informational content.

When it came to AIDS media, PBS took the lead (though not in an admirable way) as early as 1985 by producing the *Frontline* special, *AIDS: A National Inquiry*. This program focuses on Fabian Bridges, a black man with AIDS who is portrayed as a menace to public health – travelling the country and knowingly infecting people with HIV. As Martha Gever writes, “As one of the first primetime productions about AIDS in the US, with the imprimatur of public television further validated by documentary veracity, the program confirmed the most irrational, rabid fears of the promiscuous homosexual threatening public health.”

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health.” Similarly, Douglas Crimp calls it “the most extended, and most vicious, story of a person with AIDS that American television has thus far presented.”

Turned away by family and institutions, Fabian is seen as drifting from place to place, sometimes even ordered out of cities with nowhere to turn. In some of the more disturbing moments, city council officials essentially equate him to a potential murderer carrying a lethal weapon in his blood, and later the Houston public health department sends him an order to refrain from exchanging bodily fluids. As Crimp continues, “The true grounds on which I imagine the gay community protested are the dangerous insinuations of the film: that the public health is endangered by the free movement within society of people with AIDS; that gay people with AIDS irresponsibly spread HIV to unsuspecting victims.”

Fabian’s circumstances were widely publicized at the time, and an article in Time Magazine on the difficulties of people with AIDS finding and staying in housing had the following to say:

Fabian Bridges, diagnosed in Houston as having AIDS, wandered to Indianapolis, where he was arrested for stealing a bicycle. When a local judge, John Downer, heard that Bridges had AIDS, he reached into his pocket, gave the defendant $20 and told deputies to put him on a bus for Cleveland. Bridges, 30, was supposed to visit his mother there. Instead, he took to the streets, where he began peddling sex.

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215 Crimp (1991), 123.

When told a different way, this story becomes less of a warning to be fearful of people with AIDS and more of an indictment of the public health, public housing, and criminal justice systems.

Soon after this program, *AIDS: Chapter One* (1985) was broadcast as part of PBS’s *NOVA* series, winning an Emmy award for its explanation of how scientists worked toward understanding and combating AIDS in the first four years after the discovery of HIV. As a documentary that focuses on heroic doctors and scientific discovery, it ignores the controversy surrounding those very doctors and their discoveries. At a time when theories were continuously being disproven and as new information about AIDS was coming to light, it takes medical findings as unquestionable fact rather than sites of contestation. Paula Treichler writes, “The film’s title draws on the conventional conceit that scientific progress is an unfolding story, yet it can also be interpreted to suggest that scientific progress itself is a story, a novelistic fiction.” This notion is obviously taken a step further as the narrative of scientific discovery is written as literary journalism via Randy Shilts’ *And the Band Played On* and doubly compounded as it is dramatized as the HBO film.

Even more pressing is how *AIDS: Chapter One* renders people with AIDS as second in importance to the doctors involved in epidemiological detective work. As Ronald Griggs writes, “Looked at closely, the program's simplifications amount to distortions; its cliché, conventional, narrative form misrepresents both the medical community's role and attitude

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217 Treichler (1999), 130.
vis-à-vis the AIDS crisis and the humanity of gay PWAs (People with AIDS).”

He continues, “The medical participants tell their story from their own viewpoints while the PWAs become mere pawns and guinea pigs for those authoritative voices.” We can see in this documentary how the “technoethical consciousness” described by John Erni was at work in the broader cultural discourse about AIDS. Doctors, scientists, and public health officials develop tests and treatments and make the rules, while PWAs become beholden to the regime of truth presented by these institutions (not to mention the high price of medical care and prescriptions or the injustices placed upon them by communities).

Over the next two years, PBS continued by producing *The A.I.D.S. Show: Artists Involved With Death and Survival* (1986), a documentary about San Francisco’s Theater Rhinoceros as the theater company copes with the illness and death of some of their actors and friends. This was followed the next year with *Living With AIDS* (1987), a P.O.V. documentary about a the last weeks in the life of a young gay man, and *AIDS: Changing the Rules* (1987), which, as I have pointed out, attempted to bridge the distanced mode of address typical of more didactic or journalistic programs in an attempt to relate to a younger audience with “straight talk.”

In 1989, the six-part series, *The AIDS Quarterly* and the much shorter *America in the Age of AIDS* both aired. After a number of these informative programs that often relied on a tone familiar to investigative journalism (particularly those under the banners of *NOVA* and *Frontline*), two HIV/AIDS programs made under the auspices of *P.O.V.* made a tremendous

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<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC37folder/PBSandAIDS.html>
splash. As previously noted, unlike *Frontline* documentaries that are made under the editorial control of PBS in return for funding, *P.O.V.* documentaries are made independently of PBS and sometimes with funds from ITVS. It is this editorial freedom that provides *P.O.V.* programs with their namesake point of view, and it is that freedom and point of view that caused such a stir in two films aired in 1990: *Tongues Untied* and *Stop the Church*.

*Tongues Untied*, a poetic short film by Marlon Riggs about the experiences of being a black gay man, was the source of so much controversy that only one-third of PBS affiliates actually aired it. Because it included explicit language, nudity, and discussions of gay male sexuality, “*Tongues Untied* presented ideas and perspectives many people were unwilling to hear, in a form programmers were unwilling to accept.”²¹⁹ As a film that is not afraid to embrace the language and images that contribute to the everyday struggles of black gay men, Marlon Riggs’ film brought a passionate anger into television households that previous work on network television and even PBS had not dared. In light of the controversy over *Tongues Untied*, PBS pulled its commitment to broadcast the ACT UP video *Stop the Church*, a video of the group’s protests at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Public television scholar B.J. Bullert has since called *Stop the Church* the “sacrificial lamb that PBS and *P.O.V.* offered to the stations after the trauma of *Tongues Untied*.²²⁰ The film depicts the planning and execution of a demonstration against the Catholic Church’s stance on homosexuality, condom use, and abortion, but largely the protest focuses on Cardinal John O’Connor for his personal remarks on those topics. After screening at the Berlin Film Festival and winning the Best Documentary award at the Ann Arbor Film Festival, *Stop the Church* was accepted by

²¹⁹ Bullert (1997), 91.
²²⁰ Bullert (1997), 123.
*P.O.V.* and included in their schedule, but it was removed from the national PBS broadcast schedule after the public relations fight that resulted from *Tongues Untied*.

Importantly, even though it was removed from the national PBS schedule, some individual affiliates such as KCET in Los Angeles did air the film. At that point, the choice of whether or not to air *Stop the Church* became largely a matter of local politics as affiliates in conservative areas or whose already-small budgets were at risk chose not to air the film.

As James Ledbetter writes,

> Explaining the decision to zap the film from the airwaves, P.O.V. president David Davis said that in the wake of the previous month’s problems with *Tongues Untied*, it would be “irresponsible, with so little notice, to expect stations to handle the level of press interest and viewer response *Stop the Church* is likely to generate.” This may have been the first time in television history that a program was canceled because viewers might have been too interested in it.\(^{221}\)

So although the *P.O.V.* series has a much more free-form nature and maintains a funding structure that provides some measure of independence, the programs still rely on distribution from PBS affiliates. As Ronald Gregg writes,

> That PBS censored *Tongues Untied* is not surprising. That act is consistent with PBS' history of its relationship to independent documentarists in the United States. PBS' original freedom and independence, its mandate to offer a diverse set of political and social viewpoints, has been attacked and undermined almost from the beginning of its creation in 1967. First during the Nixon administration, then intensifying during the Reagan years, political and commercial pressure groups have systematically attempted to erode or destroy PBS' original mission.\(^{222}\)

While it was impossible for films like *Tongues Untied* and *Stop the Church* to achieve distribution via network television or mainstream cinema, PBS was a space for these films to

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\(^{221}\) Ledbetter (1997), 188.

\(^{222}\) Greggs (1992).
be programmed even if pressure from various interests sometimes prevented some of them from making it to a national broadcast.

The political pressure on *Tongues Untied* was also about more than competing ideas over the mission and values of PBS. As Herman Gray notes, the film was also a flashpoint for intensifying pressure from the Right in regard to the welfare state. Gray makes the connection between the dismantling of the welfare state and increasing attacks on African-American women perceived by the Reagan administration as “welfare queens.” He claims that *Tongues Untied* was the “perfect target” for people like Senators Jesse Helms and Arlen Specter to go after the black community through a moral imperative… [implying] that homosexuality leads to the degradation of the family, which leads to pleasure unbounded, which leads to the decadence and the fall of Western civilization – if one was to believe their logic. And here was a film that showed black men loving black men without apology and without a denial of the presence of a homoerotic culture in the black community.223

The issue with *Tongues Untied* was not that it was an AIDS film; many AIDS films were aired on PBS unscathed. Some like the *Frontline* and *NOVA* programs relied on journalistic approaches while a *P.O.V.* documentary such as *Living With AIDS* was a much more personal tale. The issue was also not simply that it was a film about gay men; *Living With AIDS* featured a young, gay man quite sympathetically and to great acclaim and minimum fuss. A press release from PBS explaining why they pulled *Stop the Church* states that the film was “inappropriate for distribution because its pervasive tone of ridicule overwhelms its critique of policy. In addition, it does not meet PBS’s standards for quality.”224

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223 Herman Gray, Interview on DVD Extras for *Tongues Untied* (Frameline Distribution, 2008).
224 Bullert (1997), 129.
with Tongues Untied and Stop the Church were all about their mode of address. These films were angry, confrontational, and were opposed to both a moral conservatism and a right-wing political ideology. In being oppositional, they themselves invited powerful opposition.

One final documentary airing on PBS at this time is worth mentioning. Absolutely Positive (1991) was accepted by P.O.V. and received a national broadcast. The documentary had already been screened at the Sundance Film Festival and the Berlin Film Festival. The director, Peter Adair, had previously co-directed (with Rob Epstein) The AIDS Show in 1986. Rounding out these early years of HIV/AIDS programming on PBS, Absolutely Positive interviews eleven HIV-positive individuals from a broad cross-section of society. The interviewees vary in ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and geographic location, and they contracted the virus from a variety of transmission methods: gay sex, straight sex, needle sharing, and blood transfusions.

The format is far more traditional than Tongues Untied or Stop the Church and fits a perfectly mainstream approach to AIDS media. As part of the same P.O.V. line-up, it is not difficult to see how Absolutely Positive could be broadcast without the uproar that came with Tongues Untied. As Ronald Greggs writes,

Adair’s Absolutely Positive is a tape that I admire but I also recognize that in ways, it plays into the mainstream representation of gays and HIV+ groups. In particular, it keeps them distant, controlled, and sympathetic through the interview/talking heads format. A viewer can easily judge these nice HIV+ persons, seeing them as receiving their sad retribution for a past “unhealthy” lifestyle.  

These interviews are moving but tame. For example, one of the interviewees is a member of ACT UP, prominently wearing an ACT UP button and later shown addressing a crowd, but

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in this scene the anger and oppositional theatrics largely associated with the group are absent. Instead, the organization is made to look like any other group of individuals concerned with spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS. The spectrum of individuals interviewed in the documentary speaks to the growing understanding of AIDS by 1991 not as a disease of risk groups but as an illness that can affect anyone. Importantly, though, this is clearly not the dominant point of view at the time as media discourse still largely figured AIDS as an epidemic affecting homosexuals, drug users, and prostitutes while still pushing the notion that everyone should be afraid of contracting HIV.

As this final documentary and brief overview of PBS’s output of AIDS media in the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrates, PBS typically produced AIDS media that fit its overall mission and sensibility. Unlike network television, there was sometimes more freedom to discuss matters of sexuality, but because of PBS’s funding structure and its sense of what constituted appropriate programming, these programs often fell short of the hopes of many critics. Like PBS, HBO also became a space for AIDS media to find a home outside of the imperatives of network television and Hollywood cinema. Unlike PBS, though, HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming operated under a different economic model and sense of purpose. This manifested itself in HBO often focusing on entertainment programming rather than informational programming or, when providing informational or documentary programming, being more welcoming of sensationalism and mature content. While this may largely be about reinforcing and extending HBO’s reputation in these areas, it also served as an important site for AIDS media during this crucial time.
In the remainder of this chapter, I provide an overview of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming through several equally important lenses. As I have pointed out throughout this dissertation, an examination of HBO’s output in this area requires a variety of approaches in order to situate these programs in a broader historical and cultural context while also analyzing them in a meaningful way. These programs cannot be fully understood without careful consideration of HBO’s broader industrial history, nor can they be understood without taking into account the political, economic, and social issues that helped to shape that industrial narrative. Finally, these programs are set against the background of AIDS media on film and television from the late 1980s to today in order to explore the way they represent the problems created and exasperated by the AIDS crisis and the neoliberal solutions proposed, accepted, and enacted through television and film.

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. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, 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 it in a popular format emphasizing risqué content and controversial topics. In many ways, HBO became a space for the type of HIV/AIDS programming that could not 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, the very fact 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 approach 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.

HBO’s foray into HIV/AIDS programming began in 1987 with a nearly three-hour, two-part film titled *Intimate Contact*. Perhaps fittingly, HBO’s first HIV/AIDS program is also almost prototypical of the cable network’s later dramatic fare. Like other HBO films such as *Citizen Cohn* (1992) and *And the Band Played On, Intimate Contact* was a drama that received the kind of critical praise that would be common for HBO as time went on. Despite the similar style and genre that *Intimate Contact* shared with these later productions, a great deal of HBO’s earliest HIV/AIDS programs were quite different than this. In fact, most of HBO’s earliest HIV/AIDS programming would not, on the surface, appear to be material that one would readily associate with HBO. Many of these early programs are documentaries and
after-school specials, not epic dramas with ensemble casts and critically acclaimed writing. To put it another way, the HIV/AIDS programs that first appeared on HBO were, for the most part not the big event appointment television for which HBO has become more recently known.

*Intimate Contact* was produced for Central Television in the UK and was aired in the U.S. as a two-part mini-series on consecutive nights on HBO.\(^{226}\) It repeated a number of times on HBO in 1987 and was distributed on videocassette by HBO Home Video. Directed by Waris Hussein, who had previously directed for network television and PBS, the film stars Daniel Massey, British actor of stage and screen who later played Trotsky in HBO’s *Stalin* (1992). Massey plays Clive, an upper-class heterosexual British businessman who contracts HIV from a prostitute while on a business trip to New York. The film also stars Claire Bloom as Daniel Massey’s wife, Ruth, and Lizzy McInnery who plays Charlotte, a young aristocratic heroin addict who contracts HIV from a dirty needle. The film’s length, acting pedigree, and unfiltered approach is exactly what one might expect from HBO and is certainly a far cry from the made-for-TV AIDS movies on network television while the production values are also far higher than Showtime’s *As Is* from the previous year.

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 were 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

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\(^{226}\) HBO’s relationship with British television would only increase over the years shifting from importing British films to co-producing and co-financing films and mini-series such as *The Girl in the Café* and *Band of Brothers*. 

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production lag time. It is clear that 1985’s *An Early Frost* figured heterosexuals as simply fearful of catching HIV through casual contact with AIDS patients, and as late as 1989, *Longtime Companion* would still focus on homosexual men dealing with AIDS. Prior to 1987, early independent films like *Buddies*, *Parting Glances*, and *As Is* largely ignored heterosexuals all together, and television’s biggest stride in representing AIDS as a heterosexual concern would be *The Ryan White Story* and its portrayal of a young hemophiliac. In the case of *Intimate Contact*, when it came to representing AIDS as not just a “gay plague,” HBO was quite ahead of the curve in 1987.227

Like many of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programs, *Intimate Contact* deals with overcoming prejudice and eventually moving toward forms of political activism and public outreach. Much of the film focuses on the family’s attempt to hide the fact that Clive has AIDS as they conceal his diagnosis from the company doctor, the members of their golf club, and the rest of their social circle. In fact, his wife Ruth is so terrified of people finding out that she openly says that she would like Clive to die quickly and quietly at home with everyone assuming that he died of cancer. The film takes a turn, though, as Ruth meets a young gay couple dealing with being ostracized for having AIDS. At the same time, Ruth’s own son shuts out his father for fear of jeopardizing his future political career. Ruth begins the road to activism – while hosting a dinner party, no less – by first refusing to be quiet about her family secret any longer. She then spends the rest of the film taking up the cause of other AIDS patients who are being unfairly treated by society.

227 As *Intimate Contact* was originally produced for British television, it’s important to note that representations of heterosexual AIDS patients was more common in Great Britain at the time, with BBC2 airing *Sweet As You Are* (1988) starring Liam Neeson as a heterosexual teacher who contracts HIV from an affair with a female student.
The prejudices toward AIDS patients are not limited to any one group in the film. The young gay couple has been kicked out of their fitness club after being deemed a health risk for the public showers. A hemophiliac boy and his father have to move out of their tenement housing in order to find a new place where they can hide the son’s illness. Once in their new community, the boy is turned away from school when other parents find out that he has AIDS. For Clive and Ruth, her attempts to gather resources for a public talk and exhibition about AIDS patients cause the more powerful forces of her genteel society to continually shut her out.

What is special about this early HBO HIV/AIDS program is not simply that it is the first, but that it already points to the type of programming that would become HBO’s hallmark. John Leonard of *New York Magazine* writes in his review of the film,

> I’d have thought that any TV movie about AIDS in today’s atmosphere of blame and paranoia and self-righteousness would be either meretricious soap opera or mind-numbing agitprop. Not for the first time, I’d have been wrong. *Intimate Contact* tells us everything we didn’t want to know about loneliness and guilt; failures of character and evil gossip and mass ugliness; tremors, vomiting, incontinence, and swellings that burst, and bodies that burn down defenseless to a cinder-shred of self outside society, and so far, hope.\(^{228}\)

It would not be a stretch of the imagination to imagine the same review being written about *Angels in America* or any other HBO film that pulls no punches in its sophisticated storytelling. Additionally, HBO’s reputation for sexually explicit programming, coupled with the film’s primary focus on heterosexual AIDS, provides one explanation for why *Intimate Contact* is the only early AIDS program with an erotic sex scene. After Clive learns that he has AIDS, the viewer is given a racy flashback of him and his business colleagues with the

prostitutes. The sex party is shot in gritty black and white cinematography as we see the prostitute naked from the waist up, and the scene is scored with the film’s only rock song.

Right out of the gate, HBO offered an example of the type of production it was capable of, and in a format that was consistent with its existing original programming – a format that continued bring them a great deal of success. That said, it would take five years for HBO to work within that genre again.

Only one week later, HBO followed Intimate Contact with the Surgeon General Q&A, AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know, But Were Afraid to Ask (1987). While I have provided a more extensive analysis in chapters four and six, it is important to mention in this context that 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 Q&A with Dr. C. Everett Koop. In retrospect, it sounds absurd that the Surgeon General would not be broadcasting to a wider audience than HBO’s subscriber base, but as we’ve seen, the Reagan administration and its various agencies did not coordinate the massive public health effort that one would have expected in the face of such a deadly epidemic. 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.

Later that year, HBO distributed the ABC After School Special, Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story (1987) 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 providing moral instruction as the film’s message of community
tolerance and acceptance is front and center. No cinematic masterpiece, John J. O’Connor writes in his New York Times review,

Coming on the heels of national headlines about the violence surrounding three young hemophiliac brothers in Florida who are infected with the AIDS virus, this little drama’s appeal for informed tolerance could hardly be more worthy. It would have helped considerably if the script were not so sketchy and, in the crucial crunch, so unconvincing.229

While the timing of the release was fortuitous considering the violence against the three young brothers in Florida, the special still falls into the criticism leveled against many AIDS-related productions of the time. The review continues,

Even though done in dramatic shorthand, Just a Regular Kid does serve the important purpose of conveying essential information about what continues to be an extremely emotional subject. Of course, it is difficult to realize from this sort of television exercise that the vast majority of AIDS victims are homosexuals and drug addicts, with an alarming number of blacks and Hispanics represented in the totals. But these groups, it seems, don't lend themselves as easily to inspirational tracts. Television entertainment's concern for AIDS-infected homosexuals seems to have expired with An Early Frost nearly two years ago. As usual, television's reality ends up curiously skewed, to say the least.

The common criticism appears again and prompts the question: how did mainstream AIDS media at the time address the universal and the particular when the universal was so often figured as heterosexual and white and the particular as gay and male?

If a program only focuses on the homosexual experience it may provide important information at a crucial moment, but it also runs the risk of furthering the notion that AIDS was some sort of “gay plague.” Conversely, if a program about AIDS focuses on hemophiliac children or the heterosexual community at large, it refrains from stigmatizing the gay community but leaves itself open to criticism similar to the one above – that it doesn’t

acknowledge the harsh reality that AIDS is decimating homosexual communities at an alarming rate. Additionally, it must be noted that these programs are all specific to a particular national context. AIDS media in the U.S. at this time was almost entirely focused on AIDS as a national issue despite the fact that the virus was spreading quickly around the world.

It seems that the question cannot be separated from an acknowledgement of the medium in which the representation exists. As an entry in the “Afterschool Special” series, the film’s message of anti-bigotry and sympathy for people with AIDS fits the overall message of the series and is presented in a format appropriate for afternoon network television targeted at schoolchildren. Similarly prime-time network television and mainstream cinema are concerned with achieving the broadest audience possible due to commercial concerns. This leaves independent filmmakers and producers largely responsible for representing AIDS in a way that acknowledges the complexity of the issue. We have seen examples of independent cinema and PBS struggling with this dilemma, but how does HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming fit in this patchwork of media representation? How do we properly describe HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming? Is it mainstream? Is it alternative? As Alexandra Juhasz writes,

For the most part, a binary understanding of the media serves its purpose, describing a relatively straightforward history of AIDS media. The AIDS activist movement has been built upon just this perception of the binary nature of the power of representation – both the negative consequences of misrepresentation and underrepresentation by dominant institutions and the positive significance of resistant, critical, or alternative representation.230

Fitting somewhere in the middle of this binary, HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming is at the same time commercial and independent, mainstream and alternative. Often far more similar to PBS or independent cinema than network television or Hollywood cinema, HBO is, nonetheless a commercial and for-profit entity with strong ties to Hollywood in terms of economics and aesthetics. In most situations, it would not be a misstatement to say that HBO is mainstream, but if mainstream representations at that time treated people with AIDS by “consistently subject[ing] their speech to either a shaming abjection or a universalizing humanism,” than HBO provides many examples to the contrary.  

Both *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know… and Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* were part of the “Project Knowledge” series, which HBO saw as “a steady stream of powerful, informative” productions “increasing [HBO’s] commitment to the public interest by producing new programs on additional health subjects such as smoking, stress, and surviving childhood cancer.” As demonstrated in chapters two and three, HBO was like 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 to 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 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

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231 Hallas (2009), 3.
232 Advertising copy from the back of the VHS box for *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know... But Were Afraid to Ask* (Ambrose Video/HBO Home Video, 1987).
HBO’s subscription model, it only mattered that subscribers continued to pay their monthly fee.

The following year HBO optioned the pay-television rights to *Suzi’s Story* (1988), an Australian documentary about an American woman married to the manager of The Divinyls, an Australian rock band. Shortly after they are married, Suzi is diagnosed with AIDS and learns that their young child is also infected. In the film, we see how opportunistic infections have severely impacted Suzi’s motor skills and speech, causing her to become an invalid. With unblinking long takes and first-person narration, the home video footage mixed with a more formal documentary style would have fit right at home on *P.O.V*. In fact, the documentary was actually originally broadcast on Australian public television. Instead of airing on PBS, *Suzi’s Story*, like many other documentaries in years to come, wound up on HBO and even earned HBO a Peabody Award the following year.

The film was not universally praised, however. Writing for *The Los Angeles Times*, Bill Steigerwald called the film an “affecting documentary” and said it “sometimes seemed more like a drama than a traditional documentary” but ultimately “probably won’t teach you anything new about AIDS.” Steigerwald’s criticisms about the film were not about the emotional impact, which he readily admits to as inspirational, but rather about the film’s attempts to impart information in ways that were sometimes “dumb or inappropriate.” The personal approach of *Suzi’s Story*, and the film’s focus on a heterosexual woman, made it quite different from the documentaries available on PBS but fit the changing pattern of AIDS media representation post-1987, which was increasingly paying attention to representations.

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of heterosexuals with AIDS. Though, as we’ve seen with other HIV/AIDS programming at this time, network television, Hollywood cinema, and even PBS were not always the best spaces for representing AIDS in all its complexity.

Airing the same year, *Tidy Endings* (1988) was adapted from the concluding act of Harvey Fierstein’s play, *Safe Sex*. In the film, Marion (Stockard Channing), the ex-wife of Colin, a recently deceased AIDS patient, meets her ex-husband’s gay lover, Arthur (Harvey Fierstein) as they separate his belongings. *Tidy Endings* won the Cable ACE Award for Best Dramatic or Theatrical Special, and Stockard Channing won Best Actress for her role as Marion. Gavin Millar, who had directed productions for PBS, directed this project for HBO, and like Showtime’s production of *As Is*, *Tidy Endings* is filmed as a drama rather than simply filming the stage play. These two AIDS adaptations demonstrate how cable television’s forays into adapting theatrical material provided a space for adaptations that, for a variety of reasons, would not appear on national PBS broadcasts. As a matter of fact, *Tidy Endings*, like many other HBO HIV/AIDS programs, was given prime placement in HBO’s schedule, at 9pm on a Sunday night.

*Tidy Endings* confronts the AIDS epidemic through subtleties rather than an overt call to action. While critique is present (for example, Arthur isn’t listed in Colin’s obituary and mourners are afraid to attend the funeral of a PWA), this story is far more concerned with how individuals cope with illness, death, and the pain of one’s lover dying from this terrible epidemic. The film ends on a striking note where Marion informs Arthur that she is HIV-positive and has been for five years. While we are meant to assume that she contracted HIV from Colin during a brief affair with him after they split up and he began to sleep with men,
it is also possible that Marion contracted it from someone else and actually gave it to Colin. She is asymptomatic and claims that she is probably only a carrier, but this information at the end of the film points to an understanding of AIDS as something that could happen to anyone, at any time, regardless of one’s gender, sexual orientation, or level of promiscuity. No matter how Marion contracted the virus, it is worth noting that in *Tidy Endings*, it is the heterosexual mother and wife who is HIV-positive and not the gay male.

By 1989, HBO had already produced a substantial number of HIV/AIDS programs ranging from documentaries, dramatic films, and theatrical adaptations. HBO then released *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989), which was its most critically acclaimed and highly viewed HIV/AIDS production at the time. This documentary took as its subject the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and told the stories of six people with AIDS from a variety of backgrounds and who contracted HIV through different transmission methods. Viewers are told the stories of two gay men, a young hemophiliac boy, an African-American IV drug user, and a heterosexual male veteran of the U.S. Navy. The film also provides a history of the AIDS epidemic, criticizes the tepid response of the Reagan administration, and features major activist figures including Bobbi Campbell, Vito Russo, and Larry Kramer.

Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffery Freedman and produced by Bill Couturié, HBO began developing the project following the successful HBO documentary *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* (1987), which won a Peabody and Emmy Award. Couturié had a relationship with HBO after directing *Dear America*, which was itself released after the success of Oliver Stone’s Oscar winning film, *Platoon* (1986). The history of this project can be found in a story from *The New York Times*, which states,
It was shortly after the completion of *Dear America* in the fall of 1987 that Michael Fuchs, the chairman and chief executive officer of Home Box Office, suggested a similar project about AIDS. The cable service had just produced an informational special about AIDS featuring Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and optioned *Suzi’s Story*, an Australian documentary about a mother and son afflicted by AIDS. “The consensus here was that there was much more to be said,” recalled Cis Wilson, the director of documentary programming. “And one of the goals was to humanize it.”

It is possible to see in this chain of events that part of HBO’s motivation to produce *Common Threads* was that it would be a project might repeat its previous successes. Like HBO’s earlier attempt to duplicate the success of *Time Was* with *Remember When* and *Yesteryear*, one can see *Common Threads* as the result of similar programming decisions.

At the same time, the production history of *Common Threads* provides a glimpse of another consistent motivating factor for the production of HIV/AIDS programming at HBO – the personal and political causes of high-level creative personnel. It was reported:

> The proposal reached Mr. Couturié at a sadly propitious moment: One of his cousins had just died of AIDS, instantly closing the emotional distance he had achieved from the epidemic. As a resident of San Francisco, Mr. Couturié already knew of the quilt, which had been begun in that city in July 1987 by the NAMES Project. The quilt, which in the spring of 1988 included 3,000 panels, each a memorial to an AIDS victim, struck him as “a way to make a film that would be both hard-hitting and affecting.”

Rob Epstein, who had previously won an Academy Award for his documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), and had produced *The AIDS Show* for PBS, was already considering a documentary based on the NAMES Quilt and was contacted by Couturié to collaborate on this project. At this point HBO contributed $35,000 for research and development and eventually increased the budget to $600,000, which was reportedly twice the budget usually

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allocated to in-house documentary projects.\textsuperscript{236} That both the network and Couturié were involved prompted the film reviewer to note that \textit{Common Threads} resembled \textit{Dear America} in both structure and theme, writing that “\textit{Common Threads} treats the nine-year epidemic as a kind of viral war,” comparing the actual letters from Vietnam soldiers to the quilt panels created by the NAMES project. The film went on to win an Oscar for Best Documentary Film and all profits from the sale of the videocassette (a hefty $89.95 each) were donated to the NAMES Project.

Three years later, HBO aired a very different type of documentary, \textit{Voices From the Front} (1992). Produced by Testing the Limits, an organization associated with ACT UP, \textit{Voices From the Front} was meant to be aired on PBS but was turned down. Instead the film was given a short theatrical release in select theaters and was then broadcast on HBO.\textsuperscript{237} While programs like \textit{Stop the Church} or \textit{Tongues Untied} were controversial due to their queer content and adversarial mode of address, the terrible irony of \textit{Voices from the Front} not airing on PBS was that it was designed specifically with the “PBS mode of address” in mind. As Roger Hallas writes, “Unlike \textit{Stop the Church} and DIVA TV productions, [\textit{Voices from the Front}] explicitly aspired to broadcast standards of production and avoided the mimicry of ACT UP’s theatricalization of anger and the satirical appropriation seen in the former

\textsuperscript{236} Similarly, the budgets for \textit{And the Band Played On} and \textit{Angels in America} were huge jumps for HBO’s per-hour programming budget. It is not a stretch to imagine that HBO saw these AIDS programs as important enough to dedicate unprecedented amount of money to the projects, not just because they were worthwhile but also because they were a good investment and would contribute to HBO’s growing reputation for quality programming.

\textsuperscript{237} The film ran for a weeklong engagement at The Film Forum, for example. According to Alexandra Juhasz, HBO aired the film in October of 1992 after purchasing the right to do so for $15,000, an incredibly small amount of money that still did not save the film from being financially in the red. See Juhasz (1995), 63.
works." That said, the theatrics and anger for which ACT UP was famous are front and center in the documentary, as viewers witness footage of their protests from 1988-1990.

Despite attempts at “broadcast standards” and the hopes of reaching a wider mainstream audience, this program still could not get aired on public television. Hallas further notes,

Testing the Limits had been striving to produce a mass-release AIDS documentary for a broad audience since it got a five-minute pilot video off the ground in early 1987. The failure to get a public television broadcast for their thirty-minute documentary Testing the Limits: NYC pushed the collective further toward greater institutionalization, causing several members to leave. Testing the Limits intended Voices from the Front to be a broadcast-formatted sixty-minute show on the PWA empowerment movement. By the time it was completed in 1992, it had expanded to ninety minutes and covered the huge developments in AIDS activism in the United States between 1988 and 1991.¹²³⁹

For all intents and purposes, Voices from the Front seems like precisely the type of documentary that PBS was designed to air. It was well produced, it provided important information, and it deserved to be seen by as many people as possible. Instead, when PBS didn’t commit to airing the film, HBO came to the rescue. In this instance, it is impossible not to consider the irony of PBS’s tagline, “If PBS doesn’t do it, who will?” While HBO, of course, didn’t make it a practice to include in its programming schedule activist videos like Stop the Church, which strayed far away from the mainstream, this form of activist video with a palatable mode of address was acceptable. Voices from the Front was edgy, but it was well within appropriate generic and representational forms. It used talking head techniques and contained an engaging pop and hip-hop soundtrack. In the end, the film was structured in

²³⁸ Hallas (2009), 63.
²³⁹ Ibid.
a way that was ideal for HBO's audience and could have even easily found a place in the
America Undercover series.

What is most remarkable about Voices From the Front, and perhaps most sad about
its failure to be programmed on PBS, is that it does an incredible job of being
comprehensive, moving, and provocative all at the same time. It could almost be thought of
as a companion piece to And the Band Played On. Instead of a history of the AIDS epidemic
from an epidemiological standpoint, viewers are provided with a history of the epidemic
from the point of view of PWAs and AIDS activists. Rather than an indictment of public
policy based on testimony from doctors and scientists, we see PWAs discussing public health
issues and demanding a seat at the table when those who are making public policy decisions
ignore their recommendations. The film contains many interviews with activists and PWAs,
and their critiques of the local, state, and federal agencies that failed to respond to the
epidemic are articulate and damning. During scenes of the “Storm the N.I.H.” protest at the
National Institutes of Health on May 21, 1990, one activist says,

I have seen us be not very effective when we come to the meetings inside. People will
talk to us. People will sometimes say, “What you’re saying is interesting. Yes, you’re
right these are problems. There is nothing we can do about it. We don’t have the
people. We don’t have the money. We don’t have the time. Sorry there is nothing we
can do.” We have found that when you combine that series of intelligent, educated,
quite, logical meetings with several thousand angry, frustrated people, it begins to
move them a little bit more.

Without these scenes of protest, the film would surely be moving, but the footage of
hundreds and thousands of protestors demanding free health care, cheaper medicine, more
hospital beds, and a voice above all else, gives the film a sense of urgency and anger that
many of the HIV/AIDS documentaries forgo for a focus on the plight of an individual and a more sentimental mode of address.

By the end of the film, the viewer sees that ACT UP’s mission had changed from its earliest days and so have the goals of the film. While the earliest mission was simply “getting drugs into bodies,” the issue had become a much more fundamental one. Central to the fight against the AIDS epidemic has been the fight against a system of government that fosters a privatized and profit-driven health care system rather than a public and not-for-profit one. The viewer is asked to see the struggle for health care for PWAs as part of a larger battle for the rights of all citizens to receive proper health care, echoing health care debates that would be revisited twenty years later during the Obama administration. As much as the film is about individual PWAs, it is this sense of a larger struggle that remains constant in the film and is found in the takeaway message of both the opening and closing scenes.

In the opening scene, Michael Hirsch says to a crowd, “We have contributed to our community, our city, and our loved ones. Our government… our institutions which we have helped to build… have a responsibility to respond to this crisis today.” The film, and the people in it, demand that their government take more action and to do so quickly. For those involved, the stakes are clear: people are sick, people are dying, and there is far more that could be done if only there was the political will. In the final scene of the film, Vito Russo says, “After we kick the shit out of this illness, we’re going to be alive so we can kick the shit out of this system so it never happens again.” His closing remark echoes the film’s sense of urgency and struggle while also pointing out that PWAs should demand more than just
beating the disease; they should demand a complete change in the priorities and rationalities that pervade our systems of public health and government.

In the same year that HBO aired *Voices From the Front*, HBO also produced *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* (1992) under the dual banners of their “Project Knowledge” series and the “Lifestories: Families in Crisis” series. As the promotional copy for the film reads,

> An eleven-year old Brooklyn boy who contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion confronts his community’s reaction to him and their confusion about the disease. As one of 20,000 youngsters who are HIV-positive, Joey’s true story is a gripping lesson in courage, as he tells his friends and classmates he has AIDS.  

Like *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story*, the main character in this film is a young (pre-sexualized) child who contracts AIDS from a blood transfusion. 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 fact that the film’s reviews were overall better than *Just a Regular Kid* may perhaps be attributed to HBO rather than ABC spearheading this production.

In an all-together different type of film, *Citizen Cohn* (1992), directed by Frank Pierson, is part of HBO’s tradition of critically acclaimed biopics such as *The Terry Fox*

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Story (1983), The Josephine Baker Story (1991), and Stalin (1993). This film tells the story of the infamous Roy Cohn as we see flashbacks of his life while he is dying of AIDS in a New York hospital. Stephen Bottoms writes that while Nicholas von Hoffman’s biography of Roy Cohn on which the HBO adaptation is based is a “painstakingly researched biography… lacking in editorial commentary,” the film version abandons the “distanciated tone of the book… in favor of a lurid, tabloid-style concentration on a handful of the most outrageous events of Cohn’s life.” While the film was nominated for and won many awards, critics in later years have not been so kind, especially to James Woods’ performance in the title role.

Bottoms charges Woods with delivering a “gleeful performance” in a film that turns Roy Cohn into “little more than a monstrous cartoon.” Similarly, Bottoms critiques the film for its “crudely stereotyped assumptions about both Jewishness and homosexuality,” reinforcing “groundless, pop-psychological theories about the ‘causes’ of homosexuality by implying that Roy’s ‘deviant’ orientation is the result of having had an over-protective mother.”

Like Citizen Cohn, HBO’s 1993 production of And the Band Played On was a based-on-a-true-story drama. Adapted from Shilts’ best-selling book, the all-star ensemble cast and multiple-narrative structure prompted Paula Treichler to call it “the first screen drama to communicate the history and international scope of the epidemic, tie together the work of various scientific and clinical fields, emphasize politics and policy, and, in short, go beyond

243 Bottoms (1996), 159.
stories of individual suffering.” Shilts’ complex narrative is mainly told through an epidemiological detective story centered on Dr. Don Francis (Matthew Modine) of the Centers for Disease Control. Considered both courageous and cowardly, this complicated film won a number of awards for its risks while also spurring the anger of the AIDS community for its shortcomings. While a more in-depth exploration of this film will appear in the following chapter, it is worth noting at this point that, for many, this is the single AIDS film for which HBO is most known and, along with Citizen Cohn, marks a shift in the type of HIV/AIDS productions that would be found on HBO. This shift aligns with the broader cultural acceptance of AIDS as less of a biomedical crisis that needed to be understood and contained and more of a disease that could be easily avoided through information or managed through treatment.

Later that same year, HBO acquired the rights to air a condensed version of a Canadian production titled The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter (1993), which aired weekly on Canadian Broadcasting Channel and chronicled the last years of Dr. Peter Jepson-Young, an attractive young doctor who contracted HIV. After seeing Dr. Peter’s obituary in the newspaper, Sheila Nevins, Vice President HBO Documentary Films, contacted the Vancouver public television station and asked for the tapes mentioned in the obituary. Soon, an editor was brought down to New York from Vancouver, and the many hours of tapes were cut down to a manageable length. As the program states in the opening credits, “For many Canadians, Dr. Peter was the first gay person they’d ever known, and certainly the first one they’d known with AIDS.” The 111 weekly broadcasts became a cultural touchstone for

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244 Treichler (1999), 146.
many viewers as they let this man, a homosexual dying of AIDS, into their homes every week and incorporated him into their televisual lives. Viewers see him as both a healthy-looking and athletic man in the beginning and later as a much more frail person with several visible Kaposi sarcoma lesions on his face.

Though Dr. Peter’s sexuality is rendered nearly invisible, *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* offers a unique look, not only into the final years of Dr. Peter’s life, but also into the way in which video technology and the willingness to distribute such a production can result in innovative and informational programming about AIDS. Unlike many AIDS videos meant to be activist pieces or intensely personal reflections, Dr. Peter’s videos are framed partly as a public diary and partly as a public service message. As Dr. Peter remarks in the film, “It’s given me a chance to practice medicine in a very unconventional way, and I hope I’ve been able to help and educate people through television.” It is worth noting that the HBO edit of the video diary project reads less like a public service mission and more like a sentimental portrait of a courageous individual who was lost to the epidemic. Although HBO borrowed this program from public television, the HBO hallmark traits are easily visible in this program.

In an interesting mix of the video diary documentary format of *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* and the tone and message of the after-school specials like *Just a Regular Kid* and *Blood Brothers*, HBO produced the documentary *Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nicols* in 1995. This film tells the story of a Henry Nicols, a young hemophiliac who found out at the age of twelve that he had contracted HIV through the blood supply. While his father learned of Henry’s HIV status soon after a blood test was available in 1985, he decided to keep the
results to himself and not tell anyone in the family (including Henry) for nine months. With no medical treatment available and AIDS carrying with it such a stigma, the father felt that it was best kept a secret. Even after the father told the family, nobody outside of the family knew about Henry’s positive status until he was seventeen years old. It was then that Henry decided to use his final Eagle Scout project, which was meant to help people and demonstrate leadership, to become a public speaker and spread information about HIV/AIDS.

Henry began speaking to groups of children in his area and going on speaking tours, eventually even meeting Arnold Schwarzenegger and President Bill Clinton. Like many of these documentaries, *Eagle Scout* was executive produced by Sheila Nevins and was promoted quite well by HBO. On World AIDS day in 1995, HBO ran a repeat of *Eagle Scout* followed by *And the Band Played On* while other cable channels like Bravo aired a repeat of *Longtime Companion* and even the Playboy Channel ran a four-hour special and a live call-in program. 245 Like *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter*, this film maintains its focus on individual struggle rather than a broader movement of AIDS activism and education. As the messages of inclusion and understanding are clearly present, the film (like many of HBO’s HIV/AIDS projects) presents its “Western liberal humanism” front and center. The central message of much of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming could almost be boiled down to the simple plea that “we must all do our part” to battle this epidemic and the prejudices and injustices that have been brought along with it. While many of these programs do provide the essential information that the public needs to understand what HIV is and how to avoid contracting it, what these HBO programs do far better than their public television

counterparts often has very little to do with these kinds of practical concerns. Instead, these programs, especially in their most sentimental and dramatized forms, are instructional in a different way; they teach us how to exist in a world where such an epidemic seems to test our very humanity.

In something of a dramatized version of this documentary, HBO also released another addition to their “Project Knowledge” series, a film titled *A Dangerous Affair: A Teenager’s Story of AIDS* (1995). This film is based on the true story of Kim Frey who contracted AIDS from a college boyfriend and then began a career of talking to young people about safe sex. This film continues the message of outreach and acceptance common to many of these HBO programs at the time and was also part of the “Lifestories: Families in Crisis” series as well. Demonstrating the complete reversal that had taken place in AIDS media over the previous ten years, in his review of the film, John J. O’Connor laments the consistently white, middle-class, and straight representations of AIDS victims on network television and situates this HBO offering among them. He writes, “There are scattered and notable exceptions, but network television has generally found it safer to convey the impression that hemophiliac children who received tainted blood transfusions constitute the bulk of AIDS patients. Unreality has run rampant.”

At this point, AIDS media had fixated on reaching out to the mainstream population, no longer associating AIDS with gay male sexuality and forgetting that homosexuals are also part of “the population.”

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While not specifically AIDS-related, it should also be mentioned that HBO co-produced *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), a film version of Vito Russo’s book about gay stars and gay representation in Hollywood cinema over the years. The filmmakers, Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman had a relationship with HBO through their production company, Telling Pictures, and had collaborated with HBO on *Common Threads*. It was through HBO that they were able to raise a significant portion of the budget for *The Celluloid Closet*, but this only happened after years of trying to raise money from other studios and by pre-selling the foreign television rights.

In the example of *The Celluloid Closet*, like with *Common Threads*, it is possible to see how key players at HBO have consistently demonstrated support for HIV/AIDS programming (and gay-themed programming more broadly). According to production notes, by 1994 only half of the budget was in place. Actress Lily Tomlin was a friend of Russo’s and had been shepherding the project along the way. She personally contacted HBO’s chairman, Michael Fuchs, on behalf of Telling Pictures. She and the filmmakers went to New York and met with Michael Fuchs and Sheila Nevins, who wound up providing the other half of the film’s budget. After a short and limited theatrical run, HBO aired the documentary and distributed it on videocassette.

As the 1990s came to a close, HBO broadcast *Drop Dead Gorgeous (A Tragicomedy): The Power of HIV Positive Thinking* (1997) a one-man show performed by Steve Moore, an HIV-positive stand-up comedian. The idea for the special began as a book that Moore was writing, and he later turned the book into material for his stand-up comedy

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routine at The Comedy Store in Los Angeles. Moore was a friend of Annie Albrecht, the wife of HBO President Chris Albrecht. Annie Albrecht was running HBO Workspace in L.A., a workshop-oriented program that looks for and nurtures new talent. Moore began to workshop the material there, and after several successful performances, Shelia Nevins, Chris Albrecht, and others from HBO came out from New York to watch the showcase.

On the day of this performance, Moore was actually feeling quite sick, and his manager suggested that he cancel the performance. Moore told him, “If we cancel this show, then we might as well forget about the whole special. They’re going to think I’ll be too sick to do it. Why would they invest time and money into this if they think I’ll be sick the whole time?” He went on with it, made it through, and received a standing ovation. Production began quickly after that with producers/directors Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato brought on to the project. Like many other producers/directors of HBO’s HIV/AIDS productions, Bailey and Barbato had previously worked with HBO and had a good relationship in place. They filmed the show twice without an audience, twice with an audience, and then filmed inserts in Moore’s hometown of Virginia with his family.

When interviewed about the negotiations between HBO and himself about the length, content, and even title of the special, Moore candidly spoke about the creative differences along the way, making it clear that while they essentially reproduced the special from his original show and only cut a monologue here and there, HBO had specific contributions in mind for what matched the cable network’s sensibilities and track record of popular success and critical acclaim. Originally titled *I Never Knew Oz Was in Color*, HBO pushed for *Drop*

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248 Steve Moore, personal interview recorded September 12, 2009.
Dead Gorgeous (A Tragicomedy): The Power of HIV-Positive Thinking. While Moore’s original title was a metaphor for his personal journey based on a heartfelt story of growing up poor and watching The Wizard of Oz only on a black and white TV, the final title was from what Moore considered a throwaway joke in the routine and was a long and quirky, yet accurately descriptive, title that would surely draw attention from audiences.

Moore was also concerned about how graphic and “dirty” the special had become. When at one point in the stand-up routine he tells a story of a threesome with an overweight man and woman in college, the program cuts to graphic scenes of a morbidly obese nude man and woman having sex, covered in Crisco from head to toe. He thought this and the bathhouse scene were both “way too dirty” and said to the directors, “It’s disgusting. People will change the channel.” Randy Barbato responded, “No, you don’t understand. That’s when people won’t be able to change the channel.” Capitalizing on HBO’s ability to air sexually explicit material, the directors created content that addressed an important issue and did so through a personal story, but they also had a sense of what HBO viewers might be expecting from the subscription-based cable network’s reputation for risqué content.

Equal parts funny and moving, Moore uses the one-man show to tell the story of his coming out process, his discovery that he is HIV-positive, and the time in his life where his T-cell count fell to almost nothing. These stories are told with wit and charm, providing moments of laughter to counteract the difficult tales of sickness and fear of death. Moore came out as an HIV-positive comedian three years before the HBO special. Speaking of that time, he said,

I really didn’t care if it was going to destroy my career or not. Basically I was thinking that I would probably only do AIDS benefits, and that was fine. I was doing
it to show other people that had HIV that I was a good comedian before I found out, and I’m a good comedian now, so I’m going to continue doing what I do. It was the first time I worked from the heart and being honest in the material, and that’s when things turned around and paid off for me… when I was honest with who I was.

The reviews for the special were quite good. Major newspapers and trade magazines raved about the show and focused on the unique ability of HBO to produce AIDS media such as this. A review of the film notes,

No strangers to controversy with their original projects, HBO execs say that they chose the special because it serves an audience niche. And they don't necessarily expect the show to bring in blockbuster ratings when it premieres tonight, though it works to bolster the net's image as cutting-edge. “Not every move is an economic one,” said Sheila Nevins, HBO's executive VP Documentaries and Family programming. “Some decisions are made with the thought that if we don't do it, maybe no one will.”

Unlike the documentaries, after-school specials, or ensemble 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 throughout the two decades since the beginning of the epidemic. Likewise, the alternative representational practices of New Queer Cinema filmmakers inform this production, where even the hallowed topic of AIDS is deconstructed humorously.

From the quote by Shelia Nevins (one that echoes PBS’s former tagline), it is clear that HBO saw the airing of this special not just as an economic move. It falls in line with their earlier claims of offering a public service – creating and distributing productions that are culturally important and would not find a home elsewhere. Of course, though, as the reviewer points out, broadcasting this type of production does also work to reinforce their status as a “cutting-edge” cable channel willing to take risks on projects. So while this stand-

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up comedy special is far removed from the mode of address common to *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* or even *Tongues Untied*, it represents a form of AIDS media that brings the complexity of AIDS and the experiences of an HIV-positive life to a broad audience. Without HBO, this form of AIDS media would be unlikely to be seen outside of very small circles of viewers.

We see in this comedy special something that is at work in a number of the fictional dramas dealing with HIV/AIDS. Paula Treichler writes, “The human interest of an individual’s story can capture viewers and challenge stereotypes about the epidemic. Television often does this well. What is more difficult is linking these individual stories to the collective social crisis and showing accurately the complexity and contradictions of individual and social identity.” While HBO productions such as *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter*, after-school specials such as *Just a Regular Kid: An AIDS Story* or *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story*, or even larger scale productions such as *And the Band Played On* or *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003) utilize individual narratives to appeal to the viewer’s interest, it is the representation of “complexity and contradictions of individual and social identity” where HBO often achieved what network television and Hollywood cinema did not. While HBO certainly creates and distributes programs for a wide audience, the company’s economic model affords it the ability to engage in this complexity.

Still, it is on the level of individual human-interest stories that a large portion of HIV/AIDS television programming operates. In the year following *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, HBO aired the documentary, *Rock the Boat* (1998). In this film, a sailing team comprised of

250 Treichler (1999), 134.
HIV-positive gay men competed in the TransPac yacht race from Los Angeles to Hawaii. This uplifting documentary about survival and triumph in the face of AIDS does not speak to political or theoretical concerns but, instead, was seen by the filmmakers as a “refreshing” look at what people with AIDS are capable of doing with their lives in the face of what was once seen as a death sentence.\textsuperscript{251} While this film and others on HBO may fall short of the complexity and self-reflexivity of alternative activist video, HBO is still rich space for AIDS media to receive incredibly high viewership. Given the history and tradition of HBO programming, with a reliance of particular narrative tropes and an eye for what type of productions garner critical acclaim and awards, perhaps the more complex and avant-garde productions fall outside of their industrial logic and must be the province of independently financed and distributed activist videotapes.

While HBO has fared better than network television when it comes to representing gay sexuality, addressing the problem of AIDS in a frank and straightforward way, and operating along an alternative model of programming and distribution, they are still enmeshed within a web of power relations and constraints, not the least of which is a certain type of narrative logic and a penchant for material primed to award them with critical praise and awards. When asked in an interview for \textit{The New York Times} about whether HBO’s programming meant to better the public good, CEO Michael Fuchs spoke of HBO’s role in bringing particular social problems to light. Fuchs said that he had once read an article about the chronic problems of the underclass and said, “[It] got my attention because no one in

America is playing the role of Dickens… writing about these incredible problems. So I say, O.K., we have an agenda. If no one’s doing it, that sounds like our kind of thing.” In the interview, Fuchs [emphasized] that HBO, in a unique position in the television industry as a channel beholden neither to ratings nor advertiser support, has moved to make distinctive programming… not out of altruism but because it recognized that this was good business strategy. While he is personally involved in Democratic Party politics, he said the new programming does not reflect a “personal vision” as much as it was a matter of finding a niche that no television entity was filling.252

Of course, HBO is a network with a number of people in charge of decisions, and over time niche markets and subscription fees haven’t always been the bottom line.

It is clear that there have been a number of power relations at work, shaping HBO’s AIDS-related content over the past two decades. These power relations may shape the programming through constraints or freedoms, but the programming is always enmeshed in this web of power. As the programming has changed quite dramatically over the past two decades, changing with historical trends, cultural shifts, and varying programming logics, a closer look at the shift from the programs of the first decade (1987-1999) to the programs of the second decade (2000-present) helps to situate HBO’s more recent programming within this broader cultural context.

252 Bill Carter, “HBO as the Modern Day Dickens” *The New York Times*, November 1, 1992, F5. We can, of course, see this playing out more recently in HBO’s *The Wire* as the problems of West Baltimore are dramatized in a similarly Dickensian fashion. In fact, this is highlighted in the series itself with one of the episodes even titled “The Dickensian Aspect.”
AIDS on HBO (2000-2011)

As we move into post-2000 era HBO, after series like *The Sopranos, Sex in the City,* and *Six Feet Under* established HBO as the home of “signature events” and “landmark broadcasts,” shifts in HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming become readily apparent. 2003 saw the premiere of Mike Nichols’ epic, six-hour mini-series *Angels in America.* Based on Tony Kushner’s equally epic play (from which he adapted his screenplay for the film), *Angels in America* is a sweeping melodrama that looks back on the early years of the AIDS epidemic during the Reagan administration. Unlike the stage play which was written during a time when AIDS was on the tip of nearly everyone’s tongue and threatened to be the plague that endangered every American, the HBO adaptation seems to, as the next chapter will argue in more detail, exist in a post-AIDS America where AIDS is rendered part of our cultural landscape, a place where those who have not contracted HIV live with and accept that AIDS is a natural part of life, and those who are HIV-positive must try to do the same while downing cocktails of anti-retroviral drugs or protease inhibitors.

This shift in our cultural landscape in regard to AIDS can also be clearly seen in *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003), mentioned in chapter four and discussed at length in the next chapter as well. This lengthy production renders AIDS as a global pandemic rather than an American epidemic and is part of a much larger effort funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Time Warner Inc. to combat AIDS in the new millennium. No longer a public health crisis affecting sectors of American society, AIDS has devastated populations across the globe and is figured as the number one problem affecting the continent of Africa. *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* is a series of half-hour stories from five countries where the plight
of people with AIDS is seen through a global perspective, making it clear that AIDS is worldwide pandemic.

HBO’s shift toward the international face of AIDS continued with *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. Produced with the support of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the film focuses on a young mother named Yesterday (Leliti Khumalo) who becomes ill and must walk for several hours to the nearest doctor. After a number of attempts, she finally sees the doctor and tests positive for HIV. Much of the film is about the difficulties that Yesterday faces each day – getting medical care, confronting and then caring for the husband who infected her, and suffering the scornful remarks of her fellow villagers. The villagers do not want anyone with the virus to live in their village, and the shunning becomes so bad that Yesterday tries to find an open bed at the hospital for her visibly dying husband. When turned away, she resorts to building a hut out of scrap metal and wood and brings her husband there for his final days. Midway through the film Yesterday vows to remain alive until she is able to see her daughter begin school, and the film ends with the daughter beginning her first day at school and Yesterday walking away from the camera, alone on a dusty road.

In her review of the film, Alessandra Stanely writes, “*Yesterday* is proof that even the saddest stories can be told simply, with intelligence and grace and without falling into
mawkish bathos.”

Focusing on how, in the absence of others, HBO has the ability to make this type of film, she notes that the film delivers a powerful message about AIDS in Africa, but it also serves as a signpost in the ascendance of television over movies. Hollywood keeps hedging its big-budget bets on movies aimed at the young and incurious, so serious films are increasingly rare and ever more simplistic… Meanwhile, cable networks like the Sundance Channel, Showtime, and HBO are much less beholden to ratings or box-office returns, and have a growing appetite for the small, unusual movie that otherwise might never be seen by American audiences.

As we’ve seen, HBO’s unique position in the entertainment industry has provided it with the ability to produce such films. It is worth remembering that, in twenty years, HBO went from a fledgling cable station airing Candid Candid Camera to producing the first internationally released Zulu-language film to be nominated for an Academy Award.

Like Pandemic: Facing AIDS released the previous year, Yesterday demonstrates the difficult material conditions of dealing with AIDS in Africa: from traveling long distances for medical care at understaffed facilities to not getting proper ARV cocktails. Like other HBO HIV/AIDS programs, Yesterday was rebroadcast on World AIDS Day in 2005 along with Cinemax’s airing Orphans of Nkandla (2005), a documentary film produced for the “Cinemax Reel Life” series about AIDS orphans living in South Africa. This film also aired on BBC4 and, like many of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programs, was produced by Sheila Nevins and Nancy Abraham of HBO Documentary Films. All three of these films highlight one of the worst consequences of the AIDS epidemic in Africa – the incredible number of children orphaned due to AIDS. In an area of the world already economically and materially

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impoverished, AIDS is affecting future generations who, while not HIV-positive, will suffer from the epidemic nonetheless.

The following year, HBO Documentary Films co-produced *The Blood of the Yingzhou District* (2006) about AIDS orphans in Anhul Province in China. Many of the orphans’ parents contracted HIV while selling plasma because the blood of many donors would be mixed, the plasma would be extracted, and then the blood was returned to the individuals. In turn, a number of the orphans were born HIV-positive, including Gao Jun, the four-year-old boy at the center of the film who is ostracized by those around him and does not speak a word for most of the film. Like *Orphans of Nkandla*, *Yesterday*, and *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, *The Blood of the Yingzhou* once again shines a light on the impact of AIDS outside the borders of the U.S. This documentary was funded by a grant from the Starr Foundation, the Sesame Workshop, and HBO Documentary Films. It was released theatrically and won the Academy Award for Best Short Documentary. It was later aired as part of the “Cinemax: Reel Life” series.

The urban drama *Life Support* (2007) returns the focus of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programs to the continuing effects of AIDS in America. *Life Support* stars Queen Latifah as Ana, an HIV-positive woman living in Brooklyn who “channels her energy and regret over past drug addiction into working for Life Support, an AIDS outreach group.” As director Nelson George writes of the film, “The most important message to take away is that we need to reconnect with HIV right here in the States. It's killing a lot of people, it's altering the lives of the people it hasn't killed, and it's totally preventable. If this film reopens that dialogue,
we've done good." Rounding out two decades of AIDS-related productions, Life Support brings the history full circle – to a story about preventing more people from contracting HIV/AIDS. Interestingly, 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. Rather than focusing on the effectiveness of these programs or broader strategies of combating AIDS in urban communities, the film’s focus is on Ana’s single-minded pursuit of helping other people to avoid contracting HIV.

Life Support was received well by critics with David Zurawik of The Baltimore Sun calling it “the kind of film that separates HBO from every other channel.” Zurawik noted that HBO was able to get a Hollywood star like Queen Latifah to take part in the project and that it offered “an enlightened and touching exploration of AIDS in the African-American community – the kind of controversial and potentially downbeat topic that prime-time network TV steadfastly avoids.”

In light of the film’s important outreach ability, HBO partnered with the Kaiser Family Foundation, the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GBC) to produce public service announcements promoting HIV testing in print, radio, and television media. The PSA debuted during the 2007 NBA Playoff Games on ABC. According to the press release, “HBO underwrote the PSA production costs, including the development of all

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creative – both broadcast and print."256 This led to the GBC presenting HBO with the
Leadership Award for Excellence in Business Action on HIV/AIDS, TB, & Malaria. In their
reasoning for awarding HBO this honor, the GBC noted,

Even when “AIDS fatigue” discouraged some media companies from covering the
epidemic, HBO continued to educate its viewers about the disease and the different
ways in which it was affecting people of all ages, races, and sexual orientations. Each
of its productions made it clear that HIV/AIDS is not just a medical disease but a
devastating crisis that permanently alters society.257

From its early practical programming meant to educate the U.S. public about safe sex to its
emphasis on stories that argue for understanding and ethical citizenship to more recent
programs that are meant to encourage politically engaged activism and consumerism, it’s no
surprise that HBO was recognized for their efforts.

Recognizing HBO’s long-standing commitment to HIV/AIDS programming, the
GBC conducted an interview with HBO Co-President, Richard Pleper. Interestingly, Pleper
was not always an entertainment industry man. He had previously served as an aide to
Senator Chris Dodd, was a member of the International steering committee of the Foundation
for International Community Assistance (FINCA), a non-profit microfinance organization,
and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. In this interview he said,

I’ve always had a deep connection to public policy and world affairs… I began my
career working for Senator Dodd and had a front row seat in observing both the
opportunities and challenges of the body politic. It was clear to me when I got into the
entertainment business that there were an array of ways our industry could shine a
light on the issues and subjects that needed national attention.258

256 Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria: Leadership Award (2007),
257 Ibid.
<http://www.gbcimpact.org/itscs_node/0/0/interview/825>.
After many years of HBO’s commitment to these projects, it should be clear that in addition to a sense of “doing well by doing good” and a focus on how these programs will increase HBO’s marketability and critical acclaim, HIV/AIDS and other social issues are important to key players at HBO like Michael Fuchs, Sheila Nevins, Nancy Abraham, and Richard Pleper. These personal commitments have manifested themselves over the years in a number of projects and continue to do so even today.

In the summer of 2010, HBO premiered *The Lazarus Effect*, a thirty-minute documentary about HIV-positive individuals in Zambia who have benefited from free anti-retroviral drugs. In this film we see the same difficult living conditions such as the long treks that patients have to make to receive medical care that we’ve seen in documentaries like *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* or dramatized in *Yesterday*, but in *The Lazarus Effect*, we’re given a much more hopeful outlook for the future. Rather than focusing on the death and destruction that AIDS has caused, this documentary focuses on the success of this free ARV campaign.

As Sarah Mirk writes in her review of the film,

> There's no heavy-handed Western narrator here to explain the crisis. There are only the patients and their nurses, all HIV positive, discussing their lives and laughing in joy at their successes, backed by a lively Chicago brass-band soundtrack rather than the cliché tribal drums or *Graceland*-style songs. It's a hopeful film. It's a vibrant film. ²⁵⁹


As the title suggests, this is a story of second chances and rebirth. More than anything, this film celebrates the new lease on life that is now available to the millions of HIV-positive Africans.
Directed by Lance Bangs and produced by Spike Jonze, the goal of the film is to raise awareness (and, in turn, money) for organizations that support the program to provide free ARVs to HIV-positive people in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically the Global Fund, PEPFAR, and Product(RED). As the film is co-produced by HBO and Product(RED), *The Lazarus Effect* is available to freely watch on the Product(RED) website and YouTube and is not limited to just broadcast on HBO, though it did air several times on the cable channel.\(^\text{260}\) Such a partnership is not out of the ordinary, as HBO quite regularly partners with non-profit organizations.

In a film like *The Lazarus Effect*, and in Product(RED)’s larger business model, we also see a prime example of public service at work in the era of neoliberalism. After watching *The Lazarus Effect*, one is positioned to help to provide free ARV drugs to those in need simply by buying a specially colored iPod or GAP sweatshirt. Instead of individuals demanding that their governments increase foreign aid budgets to the large amounts that only nation-states can reasonably provide, individuals are figured as citizens who solve problems through the purchase of consumer goods. While efforts on the part of the U.S. federal government (and governments worldwide) have continued to modestly increase since the early years of this global pandemic, it is still private industry and non-profit groups that are figured the most prominently in media representations as the ones steadily working to solve these problems outside of state-centered solutions.

While a great deal of the money for the free ARV program comes directly from the U.S. federal government in the form of PEPFAR, it is not that the state is overseeing this

program; it is essentially contracting out a public health program to private corporations. The films, and the organizations that support the films, are not calling upon the state to take measures to solve these problems nor are they calling upon viewers to collectively petition their government. Instead, they are asking for viewers to become ethical consumers and donate generously to NGOs. It is clear that the logics of neoliberal economics that dominated public policy of the Reagan administration have not only intensified but have also been, from the very beginning, the defining logic of media and organizational responses to HIV/AIDS. The overwhelming force of a well-funded, well-organized national and international AIDS policy apparently never had a chance against a piecemeal approach left to market logics, moral entrepreneurs, and organizations whose approach aligned with the governmental rationality that dominated during a time of crisis. Just as we’ve seen with the outsourcing of public service television to private entertainment corporations, public health policy appears to have been taken over by non-profits and non-governmental organizations.

It is fitting that the final HBO HIV/AIDS program of this study is *The Lazarus Effect*. If the first, *Intimate Contact*, was representative of the trademark HBO approach to dramatic programming, *The Lazarus Effect* is representative of HBO’s approach to documentary filmmaking. Always with an eye out for documentary films and filmmakers with a unique voice, cultural cache, and an engaging mode of address, HBO Documentary Films has become one of the most prominent distributors of documentary film to mainstream audiences. As a co-production with Product(RED), and with indie filmmaker Spike Jonze attached as producer, *The Lazarus Effect* demonstrates the broad reach of HBO’s
documentary work. It’s quite easy to imagine this film sitting quite comfortably on the Sunday night HBO line-up right after one of HBO’s hit series like *True Blood*.

For the purposes of this project, *The Lazarus Effect* is also fitting as the final film because it reflects the broader cultural discourse of the AIDS pandemic. No longer figured as a problem afflicting homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and Hatians, AIDS is no longer even figured as an American crisis. In the United States, AIDS is seen as an illness that one can live with and manage with ARVs and other drug cocktails. As far as national crises go, AIDS has been replaced by terrorism, global warming, and federal budget deficits as the greatest fears of the public imagination, something we will also see in the following chapter’s examination of *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* and *Angels in America*.

A history of AIDS-related media demonstrates that HBO provided an important space for HIV/AIDS programs, and these programs helped HBO to establish its distinctive brand. Projects like *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* and *Angels in America* were too long for theaters and too queer for network TV, and these productions (and the creative talent behind them) are offered a home – the Home Box Office, and it is “box office” that forms the other half of the equation. While HBO may have had a mission of public service partially informing their decisions along the way, this was not the only (or even primary) impetus for ushering these AIDS-related productions out to the public. These productions fit within the larger history of establishing HBO as a particularly innovative and cutting-edge cable network, offering content unavailable elsewhere, and it is to that logic that I turn as I more closely examine four specific AIDS-related HBO programs.
Chapter 6
Documenting the Treatment and Dramatizing the Virus

In the previous chapter, I provided a detailed history of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming, and with this historical foundation in place, this chapter provides a closer analysis of four key HBO programs. These programs represent the two main forms of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming: non-fiction documentary programming and large-scale dramatic programming. These categories also represent the two major threads of HBO’s original programming more broadly. I begin with an analysis of two documentaries, *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know... But Were Afraid to Ask* (1987) and *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003). Produced sixteen years apart, these documentaries demonstrate a shift from the “care of the self” to an understanding of AIDS as a global pandemic where non-governmental organizations are the only solution. I end this chapter with an analysis of HBO’s dramatic adaptations of two of the most important works of AIDS literature, *And the Band Played On* (1993) and *Angels in America* (2003). I examine these adaptations as demonstrating the shift from the AIDS epidemic as an epidemiological detective story concerned with understanding and fighting the virus to a more recent outlook on the AIDS epidemic as part of the fabric of the American experience in something of a nostalgic look back to a pre-9/11 world. This chapter simultaneously uses these four films to trace shifts in AIDS discourse over the past two decades while contextualizing these productions within HBO’s primary generic and narrative forms – particularly after the cable channel’s successes of the 1990s and early 2000s.
By focusing on two programs from each genre, each one produced many years apart, it is possible to see how generic convention played an important role in shaping HBO’s approach to AIDS media by, at least in part, policing the borders of acceptable discourse via narrative logic, historical precedent, economic considerations, and mode of address. This approach also demonstrates the way in which cultural discourse about the AIDS epidemic has changed from the late 1980s and early 1990s to a post-9/11 world where AIDS is a continuing global concern but less of a priority for the United States. By tracing media representations of AIDS through a single cultural producer like HBO, it also becomes possible to note shifts in productions from a consistent source rather than comparing and contrasting productions from wildly different sources. It is clear that HBO’s productions speak to historical and cultural shifts in society’s understanding of and acceptance of HIV/AIDS. They also fall into industrial patterns and generic categories, using specific cinematic and narrative tropes to fit this programming within their existing production trends. While these productions often took risks that network television and PBS were unwilling or unable to take, these AIDS-related productions demonstrated elements of an overall HBO sensibility and helped to further the cable network’s reputation as a vanguard of the television industry.

By considering a select few of these productions and thinking about them through the lens of generic convention, we may better understand why specific representational strategies were utilized. Beyond generic convention, we can continue to explore HBO, once called the “auteur studio of the ‘90s,” as a single and coherent producer of AIDS media. Like studies of particular Hollywood studios or more recent work that examines television networks like
NBC or Nickelodeon as media institutions with unique voices, HBO can be examined in similar ways. Analyzing these HIV/AIDS productions in the context of HBO’s industrial history colors the history of these programs in ways that a broader cultural context alone would lack. By examining the similarities and differences, and also their placement in this historical timeline, these four productions become central to the study of HBO’s contribution to AIDS media over the past two decades.

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

HBO’s first foray into AIDS documentary programming was *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need To Know... But Were Afraid to Ask*, a 39-minute Q&A with Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop in which, according to the videocassette’s advertising copy, he “gives candid answers to the most commonly asked questions about AIDS. Dr. Koop never hedges. He answers with straight, simple facts that are neither prurient nor prudish and will not create embarrassment among mixed audiences.” HBO personnel compiled questions taken from people interviewed on the street, phone surveys, and focus groups, and then Dr. Koop answered them on camera. For the home video release, a study guide containing up-to-date information about HIV/AIDS accompanied each videocassette, and these videos found their way to libraries, schools, and other organizations. With its original broadcast at 8pm E.S.T. on Saturday October 12, 1987, its prime placement in HBO’s schedule demonstrates

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261 See Michele Hilmes (2007); Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007); and Hendershot (2004).
262 Ad copy from VHS box of *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know... But Were Afraid to Ask* (HBO Home Video, 1987).
that this program was meant to reach as large an audience as possible, scheduling it right before the Saturday-night movie premiere.

This production can be clearly situated during a time when public concern was reaching a fever pitch. As news media reported that AIDS had now reached people outside of “marginal communities,” attention was now given to how to protect the “average” family in such a dangerous climate. This shift also translated into an implicit acknowledgement of misguided public policy and the slow going on the part of health organizations. Because AIDS had been considered something confined only to specific portions of the population, a more widespread awareness campaign had not taken place early enough, and public health was the worst for it. Dr. Koop’s appearance in this documentary, and his participation in a concurrent news media blitz, may be seen as an effort to rectify the mistakes of the first several years of the epidemic.

After opening with current statistics of AIDS-related deaths, Dr. Koop brings up the original bias 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 the same “Western liberal humanism” at work in many of these programs. 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.

While Dr. Koop certainly motions in the direction of acknowledgement and acceptance of difference, he also does not shy away from prescribing proper behavior through a heteronormative lens. When asked if everyone should be tested for AIDS, he says,

I don’t think that every sexually active person should get the test done. A couple that has been living together, married, in faithful monogamy for the last ten years, I think they are wasting their time and money. On the other hand, people who practice high risk behavior, and I’ve been through that – homosexuals, bisexuals, IV drug abusers, those who have multiple sexual partners or who think at any time that they have come in contact sexually with somebody who is carrying the virus should want to be tested.

In this documentary, Dr. Koop discusses the disease in terms of particular groups of people by defining these groups as “homosexuals, bisexuals, IV drug abusers” and “those who have multiple sexual partners” or could have “come in contact sexually” with an AIDS carrier. While he uses the phrase “high risk behavior” rather than “high risk groups” and later even calls for the erasure of the phrase “high risk group” because “everyone who engages in high risk behavior is at risk,” it is still clear that entire groups of people that are defined by their sexual activities (homosexuals, bisexuals) are still categorized as different and therefore categorically remain a “high risk group.” Despite the program’s attempt at universal inclusion, the core audience of the “heteronormative mainstream” is implicit in its title as primarily concerned with “you and your family.”

The documentary continues as Dr. Koop answers common questions about how one might contract AIDS. He corrects misinformation about the dangers of mosquito bites, kissing, toilet seats, and sweat – putting these inaccuracies to rest in a straightforward and clinical way. He also makes it a point to quell any fears about the safety of the nation’s blood
supply. When the question of blood transfusions comes up, Dr. Koop’s face is centered in a close up, and he very clearly assures the viewer that transfusions taking place in the U.S. are the safest in the world and not at all dangerous. He says, “By 1985 we had a test, and since that time we’ve had an essentially safe blood supply.” He ends the question and answer session with a relatively liberal message, especially when considering the policies of later administrations (i.e., George W. Bush) on abstinence-only education. He says, quite frankly, “Abstinence is 100 percent safe, and that is viable for school children but not for adults. So be monogamous and mutually faithful. If you have multiple partners, you are at risk, and all we can say is wear a condom.” Always careful to preface his advocacy for condom use by extolling the safer option of abstinence, Dr. Koop clearly prescribes 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.

Despite the Reagan administration’s early silence about the AIDS epidemic, Dr. Koop is remembered as a very outspoken Surgeon General, and therefore his collaboration with HBO may not come as much of a surprise. Activist and critic Larry Kramer offered high praise for Dr. Koop’s efforts to speak out and try to embarrass the Reagan administration into saying and doing more.263 Randy Shilts writes, “Koop’s impact was due to archetypal juxtaposition. It took a square-jawed, heterosexually perceived actor like Rock Hudson to make AIDS something people could talk about. It took an ultra-conservative fundamentalist who looked like an Old Testament prophet to credibly call for all of America to take the

epidemic seriously at last.”264 The AIDS epidemic began spreading during his confirmation for the position of Surgeon General, and Koop writes of that time,

I realized that if there ever was a disease made for a Surgeon General, it was AIDS. The Surgeon General is mandated by Congress to inform the American people about the prevention of disease and the promotion of health. If there ever was a public in need of education and straight talk about AIDS, it was the American people.265 And straight talk is exactly what he gave them. Unlike the broader public health agenda of the Reagan administration, Koop took the epidemic seriously right away and made it a priority. His first press conferences and early report on AIDS sparked a great deal of negative attention from conservative and religious figures and thrust Dr. Koop even further into the spotlight.

By late 1987, his reports had been printed and delivered, a mass mailing pamphlet titled “Understanding AIDS” was sent to every American household, and a great deal of the controversy surrounding his role had died down. With the initial silence broken, Koop then had far more freedom to speak to the media on the topic of AIDS, and he describes 1987 as an “AIDS kaleidoscope” as he was constantly making television appearances or taping informational videos.266 This HBO documentary was, of course, one of many video segments in which Dr. Koop participated, but given time limits of network news interviews or the skirting around particular phrases that had to be done for newspapers, the freedom of time and frankness on HBO allowed Dr. Koop to speak very clearly and at length about the issue.

264 Shilts (1987), 588.
AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know might at first glance seem out of place on HBO, but, as this dissertation has pointed out, it actually fit quite well within other “magazine programs” appearing on the cable network at the time. Two years later, for example, HBO produced another “Project Knowledge” documentary similarly titled, Smoking: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know, though the phrase “but were afraid to ask” was dropped – signaling the secrecy, fear, and even shame that was often specific to the AIDS epidemic. HBO was in a unique position to create documentary programming that was controversial or even sensational and bring it to a wide audience.

When talking about how HBO chose the subject matter for its early documentary programming, Shelia Nevins said that she often made the documentary programming align with popular fictional programming. She said,

I kind of copied the movies. If a movie was on and it did well, I would copy that movie in fact… I was an excellent copycat. I’ve never been caught because I had a different genre. I could borrow hot concepts from what people were buying – what we now refer to as the zeitgeist of the moment – but in fact zeitgeist is simply stealing the aura of popularity. So I tried to be popular by stealing (oh that’s a bad word) by enlarging the concept of what was the zeitgeist of the moment.267

It could certainly be said that AIDS was the zeitgeist of the moment in the late 1980s, and HBO approached (even capitalized on) the topic in the forms that were familiar to them and had been proven to work. The man-on-the-street style questions that appear in the film can even be traced back to Nevins’ earlier work with the Maysles brothers on PBS’s The Great American Dream Machine (1971-1973) where a similar format was used.

AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know was directed by Vincent Stafford who had worked on the documentary *After the Sexual Revolution* (1985) for ABC and whose follow up documentary for HBO was *Transplant* (1988), a film about organ donors and the patients desperately in need of transplants. It was produced by Gaby Monet Jacoby who produced documentaries for HBO on topics as diverse as strippers, P.T. Barnum, and the health hazards of dieting. Jacoby would go on to find her greatest success creating the *Autopsy* series for HBO’s *America Undercover*. 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.”^268^ 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 announcement promoting condoms. Bring the AIDS debate to prime time and put an end to the myths.”^269^ The documentary was well reviewed all around and was eventually nominated for a Cable ACE award for Best Educational/Instructional special.

With its focus entirely on information about how to protect oneself from AIDS (the title of the special clearly states that it is a program designed to inform your family of the basic information needed for survival), there is not an attempt to provide broader context for the epidemic or to do much in the way of addressing the complexity of the issue. Though Dr.

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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 about 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 as a multimedia 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 had surely 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 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.

*Pandemic: Facing AIDS (2003)*

Sixteen years later, and on an exponentially larger scale, HBO released the documentary *Pandemic: Facing AIDS (2003).* From the title alone, this production announces itself as concerned not with a public health crisis in the United States but rather with a global pandemic of catastrophic proportions. The intended audience here is not figured as an American family looking for answers about how to protect themselves from AIDS. Instead this production positions the viewer as a one spectator among many – looking into the face of a worldwide pandemic. Directed by frequent HBO collaborator Rory Kennedy, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* takes on the monumental task of surveying the state of the global AIDS crisis by highlighting five individual stories in five countries where AIDS has made a tremendous and devastating impact.

As the film’s official HBO synopsis reads, “The dimensions of the AIDS pandemic are catastrophic: Five million people have been infected this year alone [2003]; a total of 40 million worldwide are currently infected with the HIV virus; 24 million people have died to date; and 13 million children have been orphaned by AIDS. The marketing materials go on to note that experts predict that by 2013, “112 million people may be HIV-positive, yet it is a disease whose transmission is entirely preventable.” The jarring notion of a future where 112 million people may be infected with a disease that is “entirely preventable” points to the

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sense of inevitability and desperation that one feels when presented with figures such as these. Given its global perspective, the program seems to suggest that educating the American public with safe-sex practices didn’t change the fact that the epidemic was, from the very beginning, a global one.

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.”²⁷¹ Echoing this notion, Pandemic: Facing AIDS 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 five countries profiled in the film are Uganda, Thailand, Russia, Brazil, and India. Interestingly, the United States is not one of them, and neither are any Western European countries. The film seems to position the pandemic as something that is occurring outside of the borders of the United States and Western Europe. While Thailand and Uganda are presented as lacking the material foundation for basic public health structures to combat AIDS, countries like India and Russia are figured as having far more resources but lacking the political will to enact more effective policies. Brazil on the other hand is seen as a model of an effective and comprehensive AIDS policy, but, importantly, the role of the state is downplayed in order to focus on the role of the family and community.

Like AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know, Pandemic: Facing AIDS also demonstrates a commitment to neoliberal responses to the AIDS crisis. The film’s focus

²⁷¹ Treichler (1999), 7.
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 included, only Brazil is profiled as a model of what a strong central government can do (providing free anti-retroviral drugs to all patients), but 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 in films such as *And the Band Played On* and *Voices From the Front*.\(^{272}\)

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.

Following this logic, two clear trends can be seen in HBO’s AIDS-related programming and AIDS discourse more broadly. The first is a focus on AIDS as a public health issue to be dealt with through individual “care of the self,” and the second is a more recent focus on AIDS as a global pandemic (no longer just the province of the U.S. Public Health Services) where the strategy becomes reliance on non-governmental organizations to

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\(^{272}\) The lack of critique may be, at least in part, due to the film’s partnership with The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which works closely with governments and NGOs alike in these countries.
tackle the problem (*Life Support* and *The Lazarus Effect* are both other examples of this).\(^2\) Throughout the overwhelming majority of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming, the viewer is largely positioned as having the freedom 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 to make a difference locally. The emphasis is not on the government solving the problem of the AIDS crisis, but, rather, it is the individual who can make the most difference by containing and eradicating the virus through individual practices.

It is important to note, however, that, unlike earlier programs like *Intimate Contact*, *Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nicols*, or *Life Support*, the documentary *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* understands AIDS to be a global pandemic beyond the realm of that which can be solved by individual action alone. Instead, non-governmental agencies are positioned as the ultimate solution to this global problem, and the role of the individual is limited to that of one who must pressure the government to increase funding for these organizations. It is the organizations, not the government, who are figured as central to the effort to rid the world of this pandemic. This commitment to neoliberal policies informs the representational strategies of the film and ensures that even when the state is depicted as *able* to offer a solution to the problem, the emphasis should be on non-state actors that behave in accordance with the logic of the modern state – that is, governing from a distance. *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* works in

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\(^2\) While not an AIDS film, the example of *The Girl in the Café* is an interesting one. As a direct plea for the G8 countries to step up their efforts and commit to the Millennium Goals, the film can be seen as calling for something radically different than typical neoliberal approaches. While the film did receive critical praise and perhaps increased awareness of global poverty and the role of the G8 in global governance, its mission was ultimately not successful.
exactly such a way to educate viewers about the problem of AIDS through stories about individuals dealing with the epidemic within specific national contexts. While the viewer does become more informed and even sympathetic, the effort here is not to instill in the viewer 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.

The five countries represented in Pandemic: Facing AIDS might all be dealing with HIV/AIDS, but there are important national differences in the primary course of transmission and in the efforts to combat the continual spread. A female sex worker represents the epidemic in Thailand as she is taken care of by monks when the state fails to provide proper treatment. In Russia we follow a young couple who contracted HIV via intravenous drug use and is getting little to no state support. In India, the film offers a truck driver whose wife desperately wants to have a child with him despite his HIV-positive status. In Uganda we see the efforts of community organizations that take care of AIDS orphans, and we follow several adult villagers who test positive for HIV. Finally, in Brazil, we see a young homosexual man who is getting free anti-retroviral treatment from the state but who, more importantly, also has a loving and supportive family to care for him. Though the goal of the film is to present individual stories and “put a face to this global pandemic,” it is clear that these representative cases are meant to stand in for the nation’s larger problems with AIDS. These individual stories are indicative of national trends in methods of transmission and social concerns that hinder prevention and treatment.
It is important to note that, of the five countries, only India, Thailand, and Brazil produce generic anti-retroviral drugs. While dealing with vastly different economic situations, both Uganda and Russia are shown to lack the fundamental treatment options that need to be offered to HIV-positive patients for them to avoid developing full-blown AIDS. Of these three ARV-producing countries, Brazil is the first and only country to have a comprehensive approach to AIDS that offers free and universal access to everyone, including providing free ARVs to patients in an effective way.\textsuperscript{274} Through the efforts of Brazil and other countries, along with the efforts of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GAFTM) and other organizations, the price of first-line ARVs has reduced dramatically over time. But in a world where only seven firms produce all the patented anti-retroviral drugs, second-line treatments are still prohibitively expensive to those in developing countries.

Because first-line drugs are highly toxic, the drug regimen must be shifted over time, and second-line drugs must be used to continue effective treatment. Countries such as Brazil, India, and Thailand, however, have been able to make use of flexibilization strategies due to the fact that these countries have their own manufacturing capacity. Uganda and many other Sub-Saharan African countries clearly cannot do the same. And while Russia has the economic and industrial capabilities to produce generic ARVs, the country’s economic strength and ties to the global economy prohibit them from making use of amendments to the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement, which would

allow developing countries to create generic ARVs in a state of emergency. For Russia, the prohibitive costs of purchasing ARVs, along with other health care costs, renders their health budget inadequate to treat all the HIV-positive patients that make use of the national health system. This is despite Russia’s officially stated policy to offer free treatment to all citizens in need. Each nation featured in the documentary provides the viewer with an understanding of how cultural, political, and economic context informs the response of each nation when dealing with AIDS, but the focus on individual efforts of people fighting the disease glosses over the underlying structural realities that determine how AIDS is understood and combated in each nation and points to the film’s embedded acceptance of neoliberal solutions to the worldwide AIDS pandemic.

While the broader intentions of this documentary should be commended, it is still important to examine the ideological leanings of the film. The solutions that are represented are the solutions that fall in line with neoliberal ideology and governmental rationality and 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 a mouthpiece of neoliberal approaches to health policy.

By examining the rhetorical strategies at work in *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know* and *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, it becomes clear these two HBO documentaries come from vastly different moments in the disease’s history. It is also clear that the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and early 1990s is not the same AIDS epidemic of the new millennium. While the virus remains within our borders, the epidemic appears to be figured as outside. While perhaps Americans and Europeans infected with AIDS may be able to afford expensive drug cocktails, without the assistance of global initiatives they are certainly priced out of the hands of poor African farmers or Thai sex workers who are statistically far more likely to contract the disease. While AIDS continues to infect and destroy the lives of Americans, it has arguably become a manageable part of our cultural landscape, a threat superseded by terrorism and other foreign threats to our nation. While these two documentaries do not contain all the pieces of our cultural history with AIDS, they are at least benchmarks that tell us where we’ve been, where we are currently, and perhaps where we are going, though they may not precisely tell us “how far we’ve come.” That may be the province of an altogether different genre.

*And the Band Played On* (1993)

Of course, HBO does not derive its fame primarily from documentaries. HBO’s landmark films are often epic dramas with casting sheets that read like a “Who’s Who?” of Hollywood. These ensemble dramas have come to define the type of award-winning
productions for which HBO is most well known. *And the Band Played On* (1993) is quite at home among these productions. The film’s all-star cast includes Alan Alda, Matthew Modine, Lily Tomlin, Richard Gere, Phil Collins, Anjelica Huston, Ian McKellan, and many others. Based on Randy Shilts’ book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987), the story recounts the early years of the AIDS epidemic as it affects pockets of communities across the country and leaps into the nation’s consciousness. The book and film follow a number of trajectories and weave these threads into a chronological narrative, at times focusing on the San Francisco gay community, researchers at the CDC and the Pasteur Institute, or more personal individual stories.

The long and drawn out struggle to get *And the Band Played On* from book to the screen has been well documented. Hollywood studios and several television networks were in talks to produce it, but the film never materialized, and it was HBO who was finally able to put the project together. About the negotiations to make a film adaptation, Randy Shilts said at the time, “For the movie industry, AIDS is still spelled G-A-Y. Most studios believe that anything gay is box office poison.” While this view improved over time, chapter five clearly pointed out that Hollywood in the early 1990s was certainly not falling over itself to regularly make films about gay characters or AIDS. This HBO production was also not immune to problems, and it took a tremendous amount of effort to get such an ambitious project made. Several directors, including Joel Schumacher and Jonathan Demme, were attached to the project before Roger Spottiswoode finally agreed to helm the film. Casting

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was also an uphill battle, and it was only after Richard Gere signed on to play a homosexual
choreographer that other stars were more forthcoming. In addition to airing on HBO, the
film received a brief theatrical release and an edited version of the film was eventually
broadcast on NBC in April of 1994.

Shilts’ narrative of the early years of the AIDS epidemic has been heavily criticized,
and Douglas Crimp has been one of the most outspoken critics of Shilts’ 1987 book. One of
his chief problems with the book is that, in addition to blaming the Reagan administration,
public health agencies, and the news media, Shilts also places some of the blame for the
AIDS epidemic right at the feet of the gay community. While Crimp clearly condemns the
book for what he considers its homophobic subtext, he says, “We cannot stop at
condemnation. Shilts’s book is too full of useful information, amassed in part with the help
of the Freedom of Information Act, simply to dismiss it. But while it may be extremely
useful, it is also extremely dangerous – and thus has to be read very critically.” In
particular, one of the biggest critiques Crimp makes of the book is that it made Gaetan Dugas
into a public enemy in the eyes of the media. Dugas was the French-Canadian airline steward
who would become known as “Patient Zero” as he was linked to the first 40 cases of AIDS in
the United States. Crimp writes,

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277 Bernard Weinraubs, “Stars Flock to Be in HBO Film About the Early Years of AIDS,” *The New
278 Rod Carveth, “From ‘Their’ Disease to ‘Our’ Disease: Portrayals of AIDS on Prime-Time
240.
280 Christopher Gittings utilizes Crimp’s critique of Shilts’ depiction of Gaetan Dugas to do a reading
of *Zero Patience* (1993), and Gittings also does not address the way the HBO film alters the depiction
of Dugas to make him less of the focus. See Christopher Gittings, “*Zero Patience*, Genre, Difference,
How surprised, then, could Shilts have been that, when his own book was published, the media once again avoided mention of the six years of political scandal that contributed so significantly to the scope of the AIDS epidemic? That they were instead intrigued by an altogether different story, the one they had been printing all along – the dirty little story of gay male promiscuity and irresponsibility?  

Crimp notes that the book includes the Dugas character in 29 episodes of the book from page 11-439. That said, there are quite literally hundreds of episodes, and given the large set of characters, circumstances, and narratives, Dugas is arguably not as prominent as Crimp’s critique would seem to suggest. It is also important to note that Dugas appears in even fewer scenes in the HBO adaptation, making Dugas actually a very minor character in the tapestry of the film.

Crimp further claims that the real “hero” of the book is actually Randy Shilts – figured as the lone journalist who sought to uncover the truth while everyone else succumbed to scientific or bureaucratic infighting or otherwise just ignored the problem. Crimp claims that the publication of *And the Band Played On* “resulted in two media stories: the story of the man who brought us AIDS, and the story of the man who brought us the story of the man who brought us AIDS,” claiming that Gaetan Dugas and Randy Shilts became media stars overnight.  

Even if that is true, HBO’s adaptation of *And the Band Played On* not only diminishes the role of Dugas, but Shilts as truth-teller and narrator is, aside from a mention in the film’s credits and epilogue, rendered completely invisible in the film version. One could claim that the true stars of the film become the “heroic doctors” at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), particularly Dr. Don Francis (played by Matthew Modine). Aside from the narrative (and heteronormative) logic that makes Francis the character the average viewer

identifies most with, the viewer is given any number of well-known real-life stars who inhabit the roles of those figured in the film. The very structure of the ensemble drama works to scatter the viewer’s interest and identification, rendering it impossible to make this a story about one lone individual. Furthermore, the typical “epic drama” produced by HBO is often crammed full of Hollywood stars with their own plotlines, creating a complex story that praises some and vilifies others.

Of course, a project of this scope that focuses on a hot-button topic will have its champions and detractors, but, either way, it was a production to be reckoned with. It brought the issues of those early years of the AIDS epidemic to viewers who may have been unaware, and it collapsed a complicated history (and an incredibly long book) into a palatable two-and-a-half hour film. As John J. O’Connor writes,

Getting beyond the standard television-movie devices of composite characters and imagined dialogue, the film version of And the Band Played On does retain much of the book’s justifiable cold rage. While the death count climbs inexorably, politicians, researchers, bureaucrats and business executives dither unforgivably… In short, even a hobbled rendering of And the Band Played On adds up to tough and uncommonly courageous television.

Part of what makes it successful is that the history provided and the critique leveled are wrapped in a very popular form filled with A-list stars and made into very compelling television. One can imagine that a documentary version of the book would not have been met

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283 This structure can be found in a number of “virus” movies that were released following And the Band Played On, including The Stand (1994), Outbreak (1995), and Virus (1995). These are also examples of a larger trend of “doomsday virus” movies in the 1990s including Condition: Critical (1992), Twelve Monkeys (1995), The Burning Zone (1996), and Contagious (1997) that can be seen as responses to media coverage of AIDS and Ebola.


with such glowing praise nor would it have probably even been made in the first place. The format of this type of ensemble drama and the reputation of HBO at the time helped to make *And the Band Played On* the success it became, and this film strengthened that reputation even more.

Despite the criticisms of Crimp and others, it is important to note that this was the first major AIDS film that had a critique of public policy at its core. Paula Treichler calls *And the Band Played On* the first screen drama to communicate the history and international scope of the epidemic, tie together the work of various scientific and clinical fields, emphasize politics and policy, and, in short, go beyond stories of individual suffering. It is flawed by playing down sex and homosexuality – no surprise there – and by reproducing Shilts’s moralistic positions and blockbuster certainties; but, to many who watched it, it remains a revelation.\(^\text{286}\)

In fact, the playing down of sex and homosexuality was a point of contention near the completion of the film. According to a *Cablevision* cover story on the making of the film, after Roger Spottiswoode turned in his final cut of the film, HBO and Randy Shilts wanted changes that Spottiswoode was not willing to make. During post-production, Bill Couturié (eventually credited as an “editorial consultant”) replaced Spottiswoode. Conflicting reports suggest that the criticism of the Reagan administration was then either toned down or amped up, and Spottiswoode claims that Shilts convinced HBO to downplay the promiscuity in the gay community.\(^\text{287}\)

Given the grand scale of the film, the project required the backing of a well-financed production company and a distribution venue that could handle a long run-time, controversial

\(^{286}\) Treichler (1999), 145.
\(^{287}\) Katz (1993), 40.
subject matter, and such a scathing attack on those responsible for mishandling the early
years of the epidemic. *And the Band Played On* fits squarely within HBO’s tradition of
provocative fare, and, as the 1990s and 2000s demonstrated, HBO established itself upon this
reputation and has produced some of the most complex and critically acclaimed
programming available, on television or otherwise. Arguably, only HBO could provide what
was required to adapt the most important work of AIDS literature published to date, and ten
years later, HBO would repeat this effort on an even larger scale with a different project.


Ten years later *Angels in America* (2003) was adapted from Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer
and Tony award-winning play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The
mini-series takes advantage of all the freedom that a cable network like HBO might allow. A
tour de force on the stage, its television adaptation is no less epic. As Gary R. Edgerton
writes,

*Angels in America* is one of the most ambitious and celebrated productions in the
history of HBO… Although fully animated from a gay perspective, *Angels in
America* addresses a much wider panorama of concerns than just sexual politics. It is
additionally about love and betrayal, the possibility of spiritual redemption and
renewal, and the struggle for individual and collective meaning in millennial
America. The work is at once intimate and epic, presenting a story of subtle emotions
and national scope.288

Like *And the Band Played On*, this project was also difficult to adapt to the screen. The
play’s seven-and-a-half hour running time and its division into two parts (*Part One:
*Millennium Approaches* and *Part Two: Perestroika*) made simply condensing it to a

288 Gary R. Edgerton, “Angels in America,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and
workable screenplay a difficult task. The project went through a litany of possible directors (Robert Altman, Neil LaBute, Jonathan Demme, and Gus Van Sant) before finally attaching Mike Nichols to the project. With a budget of $62 million, “essentially five times more than what the network typically allotted for six hours of prime-time programming at the time,” and a shooting schedule of nine months, twice as long as HBO’s normal time for television production, this was primed to be yet another HBO landmark ensemble drama.\(^{289}\) The cast included Hollywood heavyweights such as Al Pacino, Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, Jeffery Wright, and frequent star of AIDS-related films Mary-Louise Parker, and the mini-series went on to sweep the Golden Globes and Emmy awards.

Clearly, the film’s six-hour running time made it far too long for theaters, and its explicit language, queer politics, and frank descriptions of gay male sexuality made it still too hands-off for network television, even in 2003. Even HBO’s more flexible programming schedule and threshold for adult content was not enough to contain everything in the play, and Kushner had to condense sections for the television adaptation. To quote Edgerton once more, “Angels in America proved to be just too long, too artsy, too political, and too gay to be funded as a theatrical motion picture.”\(^{290}\) The same can easily be said for network television distribution as well, making cable television (and particularly HBO) nearly the only logical outlet for the distribution of a proper filmic adaptation.

The story of Angels in America centers around three couples: Prior and his lover Louis, who leaves him once he learns that Prior has contracted AIDS; Joe and his wife Harper, who leaves him once she finds out that Joe is gay; and Roy Cohn and his male nurse

\(^{289}\) Edgerton (2008), 138-139.

\(^{290}\) Ibid, 146.
Belize, who takes care of Roy as he dies of AIDS. The narratives of these three couples intertwine, and each is affected by the others. Louis meets, and begins a relationship with, Joe, who is primed to move up the judicial ladder through his friendship with Roy Cohn. Harper and Prior meet and share their secrets (through a “threshold of revelation”) during their drug-induced dreams. Belize is the friend, and former lover, of Prior and acts as the go-between for Prior and Louis’ breakup as well as Prior’s confidant when Prior begins to see strange visions of angels. After Joe leaves Harper, she and her mother-in-law, Hannah, work through Joe’s coming-out as a pair, spending most of their time at a Mormon welcome center as the threads of the narrative come together near the end of the film.

Unlike the HBO dramas of the early 1990s, such as Citizen Cohn or And the Band Played On, the homosexuality of Angels in America is not treated as marginal or supplemental to a larger heterosexual narrative. Angels in America is, as the subtitle of the play suggests, a “gay fantasia on national themes.” Joanna L. Di Mattia writes, “Throughout both stage and screen versions of Angels in America, Kushner imagines that homosexuals are at the center of American history, relocating gay men’s bodies from the margins to the center.” The queer thing about the play and the film is that what is queer is not sexuality, but the worldview of the production itself. Queer sexuality is figured as normative in the film, and the two heterosexual characters are not only outnumbered but are arguably the most queer (as in strange) of the all the major characters. Interestingly, Monica Pearl writes, “The film abandons the subtitle of the original play ‘a gay fantasia on national themes,’ for, while

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the story has remained the same, it is no longer a gay story but a national story: history, that decade, has nationalized the fantasy, the point of view, as well as the themes. Homosexuality has moved from the exceptional to the mainstream.\textsuperscript{292}

Though the story centers on several gay characters and their trials and tribulations as they face the consequences of AIDS (in their own bodies or the bodies of loved ones), this is not simply a queer story. The story of love, friendship, and a desire for “more life” is not a queer theme, but a universal one, and 	extit{Angels in America}, for all its queer politics, does not treat these concerns as particulars but universalities. While the narrative situates itself in the lives of gay Americans in the era of the Reagan administration, it also transcends this context to speak to the narrative of a post-AIDS nation as a whole. 	extit{Angels in America} suggests that AIDS has affected the fabric of America and even altered the delicate balance of the universe, making God disappear and causing Prior to “prepare the way” for a direct intervention by the angels on high.

The transcendent qualities of the film’s message make its 2003 television adaptation no less relevant. As Pearl writes, “	extit{Angels in America} began in 1993 as a story about America in the 1980s but became, in its cinematic incarnation in 2003, a film about ‘America.’” She argues that while the “story of America in the 1980s… was AIDS,” AIDS has become the “Ur-story of America, so interwoven that it is both hard to detect, and hard to tell them apart. Indeed, 	extit{Angels in America} suggests that the story of AIDS has become the story of America in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century.”\textsuperscript{293} She goes on to argue that the translation of unique, and often

\textsuperscript{292} Monica B. Pearl, “Epic AIDS: 	extit{Angels in America} from Stage to Screen,” 	extit{Textual Practice} 21, no. 4 (2007): 773.
\textsuperscript{293} Pearl (2007), 761.
queer, aspects of the stage play to the screen was rendered with little difficulty. This is because not only have the cinematic conventions of New Queer Cinema made commonplace what was once considered radical, but that also “AIDS itself has mutated from an extremely disruptive experience in the United States of 1993 to an apparently more manageable phenomenon in 2003.” Pearl echoes Paula Treichler by saying, “Although it is true for only a small demographic of privileged individuals, AIDS is increasingly perceived in the Western world as a survivable illness in the pharmaceutical age.” 294 Like Pandemic: Facing AIDS, this is an AIDS story for a new millennium, one where America’s relationship with AIDS is dramatically different than it was twenty years ago.

Not only has America’s relationship with AIDS changed, but also HBO is a very different cable channel and company than it was twenty years ago. Angels in America was produced at a time when HBO was considered by some to be the most important producer of popular film and television. Coming off of the tremendous successes of series like The Sopranos, Sex and the City, and Six Feet Under, HBO had the cultural (and actual) capital to green-light projects on any number of subjects, and they would almost automatically be expected to receive high praise. While not all of them did well, HBO experienced a time in the early 2000s where it dominated the television landscape when it came to quality, critical praise, and awards.

The production of Angels in America began after Band of Brothers (2001) had been one of the major television events of the year and The Wire (2002-2008) was just beginning. It was aired during a time when experimental programming like Carnivàle (2003-2005) and

294 Ibid, 765.
*K Street* (2003) were part of the regular Sunday night schedule. The marketing campaign for the film did not focus on AIDS – in fact, in none of the promotional spots that aired on HBO was the word even mentioned. Instead, *Angels in America* was marketed as an emotional drama with elements of the fantastic, but more importantly, it was marketed as the new mini-series from HBO. Given this successful time in HBO’s history, in some ways, that fact was all that mattered. Many viewers may have been completely unaware that *Angels in America* was one of the most important works of AIDS literature or that it was based on a Pulitzer Prize-winning play. All that many viewers probably knew of the film was that it was going to be on HBO and it was going to be *big*.

The film ends with the strange foursome of Joe, Louis, Prior and the recently adopted mother-figure of Hannah sitting in front of the Bethesda fountain in New York’s Central Park as they celebrate the fact that Prior has survived into the 1990s. Prior ends the film by addressing the 2003 audience directly, wishing them peace and “more life.” That the film ends not with Prior’s death, but his life, presents the message to the audience, that, at least for Prior, and perhaps for the nation as a whole, AIDS has been overcome. Transcending the urgency of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, or the context of the conservative Reagan administration that seemed to do so little to stop the epidemic in its early stages, the filmic adaption of *Angels in America* speaks to this new post-AIDS America, telling us that despite the history of this epidemic, we have lived and we will live. To quote Joanna Di Matta once more,

> As a deeply political, intellectual, empathetic, and humorous exploration of national themes from a queer perspective, *Angels in America* must be viewed not only as a product of its original production, or the period in which it is set, but also the era of
its most expansive dissemination (2003-). It is a conduit for dialogue between these times.295

The HBO adaptation of the play invites a new audience to interact with an old audience and a queer audience to interact with a straight one. It tells a story of America, and AIDS is only one part of that story. The trajectory of HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming also tells the story of America’s battle with AIDS, but as recent HBO programming such as Pandemic: Facing AIDS, Yesterday, and The Lazarus Effect seem to suggest, it is clear that America is also only one part of that story.

HBO’s Efforts to Document and Dramatize the AIDS Epidemic

As chapter five argued, the history of HBO’s engagement with HIV/AIDS programming has been one that has been surprisingly untold. Once the pieces are put together, it becomes clear that the cable network has been committed to AIDS programming for the past two decades, both as a public service-oriented endeavor and as a way to secure their status as a network and brand: a home for original, innovative, and at times risk-taking productions. The analysis of the four films in this chapter points out that, during this time, HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming has been influenced by generic tropes, changes in public opinion and news reporting, and filmic contexts such as New Queer Cinema. This television history spans from the time the AIDS crisis broke into mainstream consciousness and defined America in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the post-2000 cultural climate of the new millennium, which has accepted AIDS as part of the cultural landscape and is now concerned with threats on a more global level. HBO’s engagement with AIDS acts as both an historical

295 Di Mattia (2008), 246.
document and perhaps often a model of how media can be used to dispense information and raise awareness. It also acts as a cultural barometer that charts our own understanding of the AIDS epidemic in the United States and its far-reaching effects as a global pandemic.

Documentaries like *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know... But Were Afraid to Ask* and *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* give us an understanding of how these cultural shifts take place and speak to the broader media and cultural climate in which they were made. Dr. Koop’s question and answer session is clearly concerned with an immediate public health crisis and offers prescriptive advice to the American public on how to avoid contracting HIV. On the other hand, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, made sixteen years later, is part of a much larger effort to combat AIDS on a global scale and figures the pandemic as something beyond the scale of a single person or family. HBO’s ensemble dramas like *And the Band Played On* and *Angels in America*, while not necessarily prescriptive or informative first-and-foremost, demonstrate how HBO has been able to utilize a strategy that the company knows quite well, the assembling of well-known stars for an “appointment television” broadcast, in order to bring adaptations of important AIDS literature to the screen – adaptations that would have not found a home in other network or theatrical venues.

Through its generic form as a narrative of scientific discovery, *And the Band Played On* can be seen as very much of its time, when the history of the disease and those fighting it remained untold. The passing of time and the influence of cultural shifts and cinematic trends such as New Queer Cinema gave *Angels in America* the cinematic language and prepared the audience for its queer worldview and frank representations of gay male sexuality. *Angels in America* and *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* are two of HBO’s most recent AIDS-related
productions, and both are representations of a post-AIDS America. If, as Pearl suggests, AIDS is no longer an “extremely disruptive experience” for America as a nation, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* clearly situates the problem outside of our borders. *Angels in America*, on the other hand, is a look back (perhaps even nostalgically) within our borders, to an earlier time in the AIDS crisis. While AIDS is rendered as simply a part, albeit an important one, of the fabric of the narrative, the film calls upon the audience of the new millennium to not simply accept that AIDS is here to stay.

Pearl writes, “If the angels herald stasis, AIDS heralds change, argument, politics, complexity, and paradoxically, life.”\(^{296}\) Prior’s blessing of the audience, and his wishes of “more life” for him and us, reminds us that AIDS affects individuals, not just uncountable statistics in far off places or even in our own country. Through productions big and small, factual and fantastic, HBO is an important part of the history of our battle against AIDS. They have told the stories of individuals who have, like Prior, Dr. Don Francis, and Yesterday, struggled for more life and won. They have also told the stories of Dr. Peter Jepson-Young, Joey DiPaolo, and countless others (whether names on a quilt, images in a montage, or numerical statistics) who bravely fought for more life but ultimately lost the battle. Perhaps, in the end, what is important is that these stories *have been* told and that there has been a place to tell them.

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\(^{296}\) Pearl (2007), 775-776.
Chapter 7
Popular Culture, Public Service, and Political Activism

In 2005, Pat Michell of PBS and Chris Albrecht of HBO released a press statement to announce an “unprecedented partnership” as three HBO original productions, Dirty War (2004), Sometimes in April (2005), and Yesterday would be distributed through PBS after their HBO premieres. Millions of Americans without a subscription to HBO would now be able to view these films on their local PBS stations. Interestingly, these were dramas and not documentaries, but their subject matter could not be more real: fears of nuclear terrorism, the Rwandan genocide, and AIDS in Africa. These films were to be followed on PBS by filmed panel discussions co-produced by member station WETA in Washington D.C. and the Council on Foreign Relations.

While such an arrangement might appear strange to many audience members, this dissertation has pointed out that this “unprecedented partnership” is, in fact, the culmination of a rich and intertwined history between these two media producers and distributors. If anything, this announcement brings the history of PBS and HBO full circle. Where HBO once drew upon PBS for formats, sensibilities, programming ideas, and even actual programs, now PBS was borrowing from HBO. In light of the changes made by Pat Mitchell after coming on as president and CEO, PBS had taken its privatization and reform to a new level, with Mitchell looking to his roots in cable television (he worked for Time Inc.) for ways to revitalize PBS in the neoliberal, post-network era.

This program-sharing strategy aligns with a broader breakdown of other lines of demarcation and distinction for media production. With productions and co-productions frequent among PBS, BBC, and HBO; various combinations of financing, acquiring, and distributing programs; and any number of distribution methods from network or cable television, theatrical distribution, DVD, and online streaming, what are we to make of questions of about productions “belonging” to or being the “product of” particular media outlets? What are we to make of projects that originate with one entity and later wind up with another? What are we to make of the lines between public and private television or between television and other media?

Public Service Television in the Post-Network Era

The history and analysis provided in this project has provided some answers to these and other questions about the state of public service television today. This dissertation posits that public service programming has been part of the television’s history since before its inception – beginning in regulation and programming decisions about radio. It is also clear that public service television has changed shape over time and looks quite different today than it did at the moment when it was institutionalized through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967. As I have attempted to expand the definition of what might count as public service television in the post-network era, I have, for the reasons outlined in the introduction, focused my analysis on HBO. Twenty years after the establishment of the CPB, with the airing of Dr. Koop’s *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know but Were Afraid to Ask*, HBO was already well established as a space where the mission of the
CPB and PBS found an analogous home surrounded by entertainment programming. Against the backdrop of a broader discourse of public service permeating the cable television industry, PBS found itself now competing not just with network television for viewers but with a whole host of cable channels that were producing more and more cultural and public service programming.

While PBS has held its ground over the years, it has also faced budget battles, programming controversies, and declines in viewership. Most recently PBS has had to endure ExxonMobil dropping its thirty-three-year-long sponsorship of *Masterpiece Theater* in 2004, and, in 2010, long standing affiliate KCET in Los Angeles broke away and became an independent television station.\(^{298}\) As Jeffery McCall notes, losing a major affiliate like KCET “increases doubts about the long-term future of public broadcasting. PBS certainly does not play the essential role it once did in the nation’s media landscape… Now with cable outlets, not to mention the Internet, the public doesn’t rely on PBS for such fare.”\(^{299}\) At the same time, though, those new forms of media distribution are bringing PBS to a whole new audience as podcasting, social networking, iPhone and iPad apps, and streaming video constantly bring PBS programming to new devices and new viewers. Public media has, in many ways taken the lead with these new technologies as PBS, National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Radio International (PRI) have long dominated the iTunes Podcast charts. Perhaps these technologies will make the PBS model of appointment television that much stronger as

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time-shifting and portability allow interested viewers to view their favorite PBS content whenever and however they like free of charge. It is no coincidence that these non-profit, public media outlets have been trailblazers in an online environment where free content has the ability to become far more ubiquitous far more quickly than the paid content offered by commercial entities.

While these changes were altering the television landscape, television was demonstrating its incredible potential to inform, educate, and activate a viewing public when it came to important social issues such as AIDS. While no producer did this perfectly, HIV/AIDS television programs became some of the most crucial points of engagement for the population to understand the epidemic. These programs came in a variety of forms, both fictional and non-fictional, and they addressed the issue with varying degrees of complexity and sensitivity, but for many television audiences across the nation, these programs were their primary methods of learning how to live in a world with AIDS. Where television and cinema failed the public (and it did countless times), there were activists, artists, critics, and PWAs ready to take them to task. As Kirsten Ostherr writes,

The AIDS crisis represents a historically unique case of rapid, low budget production of videos that were highly responsive to the continually developing state of research on modes of transmission, testing, and treatment and that were also responsive to the

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300 Interestingly, this streaming and downloadable content requires significant start up costs and technologies in order for viewers and listeners to take advantage of them. While computers, iPods, and iPhones are becoming more and more popular among all groups, these trends clearly begin with those who can afford these technologies – perhaps reinforcing a notion of public media being subsidized entertainment for the upper classes of society. On the other hand, televisions have not always been inexpensive either, and the fact that the content is freely available does matter. The flip side of this, of course, is that almost all of HBO’s content remains behind a paywall, available only to subscribers.
critiques of AIDS activists who vocally condemned the racism and homophobia of the early films and television programs.\textsuperscript{301}

In addition to these homegrown responses, media producers such as HBO also took on the task of correcting misinformation and representing AIDS in ways that network television, public television, and Hollywood cinema did not.

One of the major goals of this dissertation was to write an alternate history of AIDS media, one that brought into the same conversation the work of activist media, mainstream television and cinema, and the often forgotten cable channels like HBO, which in many ways becomes a point of convergence for these threads. When considering more mainstream and commercial AIDS media, it is clear that determining what counts as activism depends largely upon context. The history traced in this dissertation brings into the conversation twenty-two HIV/AIDS programs produced, acquired, or distributed by HBO and contextualizes these programs against not only the history of AIDS media and culture but also the history of the television industry. As one of the most talked about sources of critically acclaimed programming, HBO has become the object of analysis for many media scholars, and this project has made an effort to bring the conversations about HBO away from only the most recent ten years and to begin to include the important history of the first thirty years.

\textbf{Ethical Responses to Governmental Rationality}

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

\textsuperscript{301} Ostherr (2005), 171.
epidemic and an opportunity to see how HBO’s engagement is embedded within a cultural response to AIDS that was both 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 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 ideological messages 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. From global efforts to fight disease, poverty, and human rights violations, 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 even 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.\(^{302}\)

In a word, many of these HBO productions can be seen as “necessary” when the government and public media were not responding appropriately to this 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 the AIDS epidemic 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. In the end, though, we must not overlook the fact that due to the failures of the Reagan administration, network television, and even public television, that these HBO programs were necessary at all does border on “criminal negligence on the part of the government.”

Of course, the production of cultural programming that brings attention to social issues and injustice is not enough, and neither is just an analysis of these programs. Though both are important, far more important are the actions and responses that come after such analysis is complete. For as much as theories of neoliberalism and governmentality work to point out the shrinking role of the state and the ascendance of private interests in the distributed management and arrangement of the population, this analysis is limited in its usefulness if reflection and critique do not turn into action. As Jim McGuigan writes,

> What would be the point of critical reason if it bore no direct relation to practical politics? [...] Lack of dialogue between thinkers and doers is annoying for those who put practice before theory: it is also frustrating for those who put theory before practice. ³⁰³

It is, of course, impossible to turn back time and change the past, but what can be said for changing the present or the future? While it is beyond the purview of this project (or my own knowledge in matters of public health policy or global governance) to recommend appropriate large-scale policy changes, there are cultural studies scholars who have thought about how this type of analysis can directly translate into meaningful and substantial changes to public policy. Additionally, as a project that is primarily about media industries and media audiences, it seems fitting that my own recommendations be limited to those areas.

If, as we’ve seen, the aim of neoliberalism and governmental rationality is to shift the responsibility of governance on to the citizen, how do we fulfill that responsibility in an appropriate way? It would seem that part of that response should obviously be to not accept the responsibility in the first place, to protest and resist the fact that the state is shirking its fundamental responsibilities. We can demand that there be a place for government to do good and important things in the world. But the other part of that response is to not let the ball drop while protesting the issue. Broadly speaking, what is required after this analysis is direct action in the form of ethical responses that are contrary to that of governmental rationality.

What might these ethical responses look like, and how might ethics operate within governmental rationality? We might look to Mitchell Dean, who writes,

If morality is understood as the attempt to make oneself accountable for one’s own actions, or as a practice in which human beings take their own conduct to be subject to self-regulation, then government is an intensely moral activity. One can approach the morality of government in a number of ways. It is moral because policies and

304 See, for example, Tony Bennett, “Putting Policy into Cultural Studies” in Cultural Studies, eds. Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992); Justin Lewis and Toby Miller (eds.), Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003). One could also look to the tremendous amount of political economy literature on HIV/AIDS – some of which is referenced in chapter five.
practices of government, whether of national governments or of other governing bodies, presume to know, with varying degrees of explicitness and using specific forms of knowledge, what constitutes good, virtuous, appropriate, responsible conduct of individuals and collectives.\footnote{Dean (1999), 11-12.}

These television programs and other responses are bound up in governmentality, guiding and instructing from a distance and placing the impetus on individuals to act and respond accordingly to a biomedical crisis. It necessarily follows that they will not operate in ways that are counter to the logics of governmentality. The tools and strategies of an approach grounded in neoliberal economics would not then necessarily call for an overwhelming, centralized response from the state.

As Jonathan Sterne argues, reliance upon Foucauldian governmentality may require scholars to “bracket issues central to their project, like the problematics of political representation and specific outcomes of the machineries of power.”\footnote{Jonathan Sterne, “Bureaumentality” in Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality, eds. Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 102.} So, while governmentality studies allow us to understand the logics of the rationality, when we get to the next step and look for appropriate responses, it does not appear that an analytic of governmentality provides an answer at all. One does not want to be stuck in a spiral of pointing out governmental logics and mechanisms of surveillance and governance and then just accept this as the state of things.

Is the answer to look toward subjugated voices and counter-conduct? Perhaps we can look to the archive of our analysis to show us practices that resisted this rationality and opted for ethical responses (the critiques, demands, and action present in films like And the Band...
played on or voices from the front, for example). if a key text helped to orient thought at a particular moment, what were the other texts that offered a different logic? are the practices they offer worthwhile to explore and perhaps emulate? should we look at a critical juncture and examine what the other possibilities might have been? as nikolas rose writes,

the aim of such genealogies is a kind of destabilization or de-fatalisation of our present. in describing the contingency, in therefore opening the possibility that things have been different, could have been different, they try to make it easier to assess that present in order to make judgments about how to act upon it. if the history of our present is more accidental than we may like to believe, the future of our present is also more open than it sometimes appears. 307

can we therefore begin to think about paths of ethical citizenship and direct action that aren’t tied to governmental rationality? after all, rationality is exactly that – rational, cold, and not concerned with ethics as such.

it is this economical rationality that comes to the surface in colin gordon’s work on governmentality. as he writes about governmental rationality,

economics thus becomes an “approach” capable of addressing the totality of human behavior, and, consequently, of envisaging a coherent, purely economic method of programming the totality of governmental action. the neo-liberal homo economicus is both a reactivation and a radical inversion of the economic agent as conceived by the liberalism of smith, hume, or ferguson. 308

it’s not that the economic approaches of neoliberalism or the tactics of governmentality are necessarily bad in and of themselves. they get a lot done – they are economical and efficient, but they are incomplete in that the goal is not to solve problems that require ethical

307 nikolas rose, governing the soul: the shaping of the private self (new york: free association books, 1999), xii.
Economics, by its very nature, is not concerned with compassion or morality. In analyses of governmental rationality, we cannot say it is the fault of the state for following such logic. It is the fault of the citizenry for not creating a political consciousness that rejects this rationality in favor of a revolutionary response of ethical action.

This is not to say that instead of neoliberal solutions we should only support centralized state-based solutions. It’s not a matter of reliance on centralized state solutions to solve all of the world’s problems. The answer seems to be in first acknowledging that sometimes a centralized state solution is the best response (or the only response) to a particular problem, but governmental rationality and neoliberal policies preclude that response from being on the table of options. It is not difficult to see the early years of the AIDS crisis in the United States, the current level of global poverty, or the frightening threat of global warming as examples of this at work. Most recently, one need only look at the responses that were on the table during the 2007 financial crisis in the United States. Rather than nationalizing insolvent banking institutions, financial institutions received bailouts with little or no strings attached in order to ensure that private enterprise was not endangered. There is no clearer example that it takes a radical political action to force the state’s hand to solve problems when the rationality that orients the state’s interests and mechanisms do not have a vested interest in doing more than managing the problem in order to continue its own existence.

309 For one perspective of how the ethical responses of individuals might work in an era of neoliberal ideology see Kwame Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).
310 Interestingly, HBO tackled this very subject by adapting Andrew Ross Sorkin’s book about the response to the 2007 financial crisis, Too Big to Fail (2011).
Popular Culture and Political Activism

As neoliberal economic policies and the increasing governmentalization of society appear that they shall continue to prevail, and as private media companies continue to create programming that contains at least a partial interest in public service, it seems that one avenue of direct and present action is to encourage more programming like this. If media corporations are interested in profit above all else, then as consumers we must applaud appropriate programming and demand more of it. After all, there is nothing inherently wrong with popular entertainment with a positive or progressive social message, and if key players in the entertainment industry can “do good while doing well,” then more power to them. The important point is not to simply create an echo chamber where dramas and documentary films about social issues move us, we as audiences applaud those efforts, and then producers mimic that success by making more of them. It is not enough to be informed and politically aware spectators; we must be activist spectators. We must not just watch the films and learn how we can make a difference. We must often follow through and make that difference.

I have pointed out elsewhere that this type of activist spectatorship is taking on new meaning as activist documentaries and other socially committed fiction films are partnering with various organizations or creating new ones of their own in order to provide audiences with opportunities for direct action through new media technologies. The rise of what I have called the “cyberactivist spectator” utilizes these technologies to operate within a networked politics, often centered on a particular media text like the documentaries Invisible Children (2004) or The Lazarus Effect as a rallying point. These texts spark movements on

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311 Pepper (2009).
social networking sites and provide easy ways for spectators to donate money or provide support from their computer or mobile device. It has become commonplace for a film’s accompanying website to offer links and information detailing how an audience member can directly contribute to a cause, and this is certainly true of HBO Documentary Films.

At the same time, though, in light of recent efforts to once again try to completely defund PBS and NPR, that same collective audience must recognize that public media is still an important voice and one that must be supported. If government has shown us anything it is that it has the power to carve out a space outside of the marketplace where the needs of the public outweigh profit motives. It has also demonstrated that innovation in basic scientific medical research can sometimes happen best when it is done through grants and for the public good rather than in order to make a significant financial return on capital investment. The same is true of our investment in public media. After all, if we don’t save PBS, who will?

It may appear that this project ends on a fatalistic note – one that seems to say, “If this is the way it is, let’s at least make the best of it.” On the contrary, I think that this outlook is pragmatic and even idealistic. While individual audience members don’t have the power to reverse neoliberal economic policies, collective audiences do. And one way to rally the citizenry is with popular media that engages them and moves them to political action. As Jane Gaines writes, “We not only hope for social transformation in our lifetime, but we hope that independently produced documentary film and video will have something to do with this
As we all know, documentary films are one of the most visible and most important ways that issues of social justice and human rights reach a wide audience, but activist documentaries are not the only route. As this project has pointed out, dramatic films with a sentimental and melodramatic form may also be ripe with messages of political commitment, and the power of these films to move audiences might be that much more effective.

While these films may not engage in radical or revolutionary politics and aesthetics, they may at least be in the neighborhood of “agitational spectacle.” Again Gaines writes, “In Eisenstein’s theory of social change and cinema, the bodily senses lead the spectator, whose involvement is not strictly intellectual. Politics is not exclusively a matter of the head but can also be a matter of the heart.” In the most heart wrenching moments of these programs, I think it is possible to see just this type of technique at work. We might think of dramatic programs like The Laramie Project or The Girl in the Café or any number of documentaries that directly engage with social issues and do so primarily through this technique. The shock to the system that comes from seeing particular images or the sympathy that is evoked for an individual or situation can be powerful political tools and are part of the strategies at work in these programs. They contain images that shock, sadden, and anger, and very often we also hear phrases like “never forget” and “never again” – phrases that

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315 Gaines (1999), 88.
necessitate some type of interventionist or activist response if they are to be more than just words.

If the forward march of neoliberalism cannot be reversed, then perhaps we must hope that the growth of moral entrepreneurship, public/private partnerships, and the establishment of new philanthropic foundations will do a great deal of good in the world. This project has demonstrated that there is a place for these instances where profitability sometimes takes a back seat to public service, but, as we’ve seen, that is quite often not nearly enough. The utter failure of our public health policy in response to the AIDS epidemic is a black mark on our history that is forever captured in the television programs, films, and videos that reacted to, and were often integral parts of, that response. There is little doubt that television and other media technologies will be brought into the service of representing and shaping some future crisis – be it biomedical, environmental, or economic. If we’ve learned anything through examining the history and trajectory of public service television it is 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 still hope that we can do better next time.
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<http://www.unaids.org>
APPENDIX
APPENDIX

HBO/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)
Rock the Boat (1998)
Angels In America (2003)
Yesterday (2004)
Orphans of Nkandla (2005)
The Blood of the Yingzhou District (2006)
Life Support (2007)
The Lazarus Effect (2010)

Additional HBO Films of Note:

Time Was (1979)
Remember When (1981)
Yesteryear (1982)
Candid Candid Camera (circa late-1970s – early-1980s)
The Celluloid Closet (1996)
From the Earth to the Moon (1998)
Southern Comfort (2001)
The Laramie Project (2002)
Iron-Jawed Angels (2005)
The Girl in the Café (2005)
When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006)
Thin (2006)
Addiction (2007)
The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo (2007)
The Alzheimer’s Project (2009)
Outrage (2009)
The Yes Men Fix the World (2009)
By the People: The Election of Barack Obama (2009)
If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don’t Rise (2010)
The Fence (2010)
For Neda (2010)
Terror in Mumbai (2010)
Earth Made of Glass (2010)

PBS Programs of Note:

V.D. Blues (1972)
AIDS: Chapter One (1985)
The A.I.D.S. Show (1986)
Living With AIDS (1987)
The AIDS Quarterly (1989)
America in the Age of AIDS (1989)
Tongues Untied (1990)
Andre’s Mother (1990)
Absolutely Positive (1991)
Dottie Gets Spanked (1993)
In the Wings: Angels in America on Broadway (1993)