

Ideology and Aids Reporting

by
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The first human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) carrier in Malaysia was detected in 1986 and within seven years, the Malaysian Ministry of Health registered 7,000 cases. This represents the known cases. According to World Health Organisation (WHO), to get the actual number of cases, multiply the known figure by 50, that is about 350,000 HIV carriers, as of 1993.

The dramatic rate of increase jolted the Malaysian government out of complacency and as of 1991, began a series of actions against the spread of the disease.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, there seems to be a lack of interest among communication scholars to examine the AIDS discourse in the mass media. Perhaps they are being "constituted" by the way the media define the issue, that AIDS is a problem of homosexuals, prostitutes and perverts.

Health issues, especially on AIDS, are meaningful within specific cultural context. How people understand AIDS and HIV are based in part on ideological representation of the mass media. The term ideology is used broadly to mean a system of shared beliefs, images or concepts which help individuals to make sense of their world. An analysis of the way the mass media represent AIDS and HIV will provide a key to understanding people's reaction to the problem.

This article will focus on ideological representation of AIDS in the mainstream Malay (*Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*) and English (*New Straits Times* and *The Star*) daily newspapers. All news items that appeared in the years 1991-92 were analysed.

General Trend of Reporting

A total of 175 news items, feature articles, editorials and letters were analysed. The *New Straits Times* (NST) carried the most number of articles (81 articles) and the *Utusan Malaysia* (UM) carried the least, only five press statements of the whole study period.

The number of articles carried by each newspaper is informative on the newspapers' definition of the significance of the issue to its readers. Obviously to UM, AIDS and HIV are not deemed to be a significant issue for news.

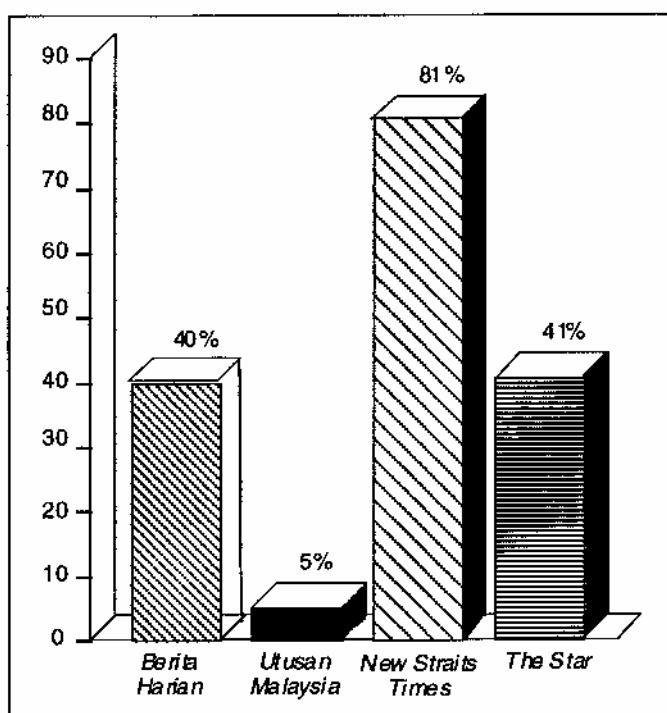


TABLE 1: Number of articles on AIDS and HIV

Table 2 shows that all the newspapers relied heavily on government officials as their primary source. Government sources include spokesmen from the Ministry of Health, police, prison and immigration departments. The category 'others' in Table 2 refers to WHO representatives, doctors, lawyers and members of the public. Non-governmental organisations on AIDS prevention and management such as Pink Triangle, Malaysian Medical Association, Red Crescent, Community AIDS Service Penang play a very active role in reaching out to the public. These groups are given some space in NST and The Star but not in BH and UM.

TABLE 2: Types of sources used in news stories

News Sources	Newspapers	
	Berita Harian & Utusan Malaysia	New Straits Times & The Star
Government	90.7%	82.2%
Non-Governmental Organizations	0.0%	8.9%
Others	9.3%	8.9%

Disease of Deviant Other

Although AIDS was initially known as the "Gay Plague", it is no longer true that AIDS is a disease of homosexuals. In fact, WHO statistics show that the largest increase of AIDS victims in the 1990s are among heterosexuals, both male and female.

However, over 70 percent of news in the Malay newspapers made references to AIDS as a disease of the homosexuals, prostitutes and drug addicts. In Malaysia, compulsory testing is carried out on drug addicts from rehabilitation centres and prisoners. Hence the statistic of HIV carriers and AIDS victims are overwhelming biased against this group. Hence, they are often singled out as the dangerous, irresponsible elements of society who, due to personal weakness, became addicted to chemicals and are main culprits for spreading the AIDS disease.

BH (23 November 1992) which carried the headline "Increase in homosexual activities" (Kegiatan hubungan sejenis meningkat) quoted the Deputy Minister of Health that 80 percent of inmates in rehabilitation centres are exposed to AIDS because of homosexual activities. Another BH (4 November 1992) article "500 prisoners are HIV carriers" (500 banduan bawa virus HIV) emphasised that guidelines would be issued to prevent contamination of AIDS virus to prison officers.

Prostitutes are also reported in equally humiliating manner. BH (19 September 1992), quoted the Perlis Chief Minister as saying that prostitutes who are HIV carriers are as dangerous as drug and arms traffickers (... disyaki membawa virus Sindrom Kurang Daya Tahan (AIDS) .. sama bahaya dengan kemasukan dadah dan senjata api).

TABLE 3: Identified risk groups in news stories

Risk Groups	Newspapers	
	Berita Harian & Utusan Malaysia	New Straits Times & The Star
Homosexual, prostitutes and drug addicts	73.6%	20.5%
Heterosexuals	1.9%	15.6%
No specific group	24.5%	63.9%

Coverage in the English newspapers tends to focus on risk behaviour such as unprotected sex and needle exchange rather than target risk groups. Less than a quarter of the articles referred to any one of the so-called high risk groups. In fact NST (11 June 1992) identified fishermen as the third highest risk group in the country, after dadah addicts and prostitutes. The

Minister of Health said that the fishermen were "believed to have contract the disease when frequenting prostitution dens in a neighbouring country. This report was not found in BH and UM.

The danger of focusing on risk groups is that this may lead to misconception that risk behaviour are the exclusive domain of the risk groups. This is of course misleading as not all gay men engage in anal intercourse, not all drug addicts share needles and some practice "safe sex". The greater danger is that the public may define AIDS as a problem of homosexuals, prostitutes and drug addicts and if they do not fall into one of these categories, they are safe from the disease.

God's Punishment

According to Watney (1989), a model of metaphorical thinking in handling AIDS is the "missionary model" wherein AIDS is seen as a "heathen, evil, strange and exotic - thriving on immorality, bestiality, unnatural acts and ungodly practices" (1989:20).

Similar moralistic stance can be read in BH news stories. BH (9 April 1991) carried a feature that began by stating that the AIDS epidemics is a reminder or early warning from Allah that human beings should avoid homosexuality (Wabak AIDS yang melanda dunia kini dapat disifatkan sebagai satu peringatan atau amaran awal daripada Allah untuk manusia agar menjauhkan diri daripada melakukan 'homoseks'...)

The blame tends to be on the individual - a disease as a result of human weakness and indulgence in deviant acts. The solution is therefore proposed by adherents to such thinking to return to religious acts and avoid such deviant behaviour.

In support for the appeal to religious values is the use of fear against AIDS victims. BH (25 January 1992) reported that "AIDS patients free to move about in the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital" (Pesakit AIDS bebas HBKL). The report accused AIDS victims of threatening to infect hospital staff, if they are prevented from going out to get their drug supply.

Imagery from the Malay newspapers tend to locate AIDS as a horrifying, scary disease and the path to avoidance is to lead monogamous heterosexual relationship. Keywords on preventive measures such as "healthy lifestyle" (gaya hidup yang sihat), "discipline way of life" (kehidupan yang berdisiplin) are used liberally by government officials and journalists although which are nice to hear but no one really knows what they refer to.

Given the above imagery, safe sex is not the recommended practice. The use of condom is rarely reported in Malay newspapers. In fact I reported that the Deputy Minister of Health was asked to explain why he was seen distributing condoms when launching the AIDS Awareness Week in Kuala Lumpur Central Market on the first week of December in 1992 (BH, 9 December 1992). A similar report was published in The Star

December 1992) with the headline "Be open to issues about AIDS".

The practice of safe sex is more widely discussed in the English language newspapers. Articles such as "Condoms a necessary and realistic AIDS precaution" (NST, 24 September 1992) and "Arrest the problem, then talk morality" (NST, 17 May 1992) reflect the views of many non-governmental organisations on AIDS and are reported in the English language newspapers.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the Malaysian newspapers, particularly the Malay language dailies, have yet to come to terms with the AIDS disease. AIDS seemed to be a disease of the gays, drug addicts and prostitutes and strait-laced Malaysians are quite safe from it! The mass media continues to perpetuate the myth that people who live normal heterogeneous relationship need not worry about AIDS.

The government has taken a two-prong approach in attacking AIDS problem. One is the tough stand (compulsory testing, deportation of foreign prostitutes and separate prisons for drug addicts who are HIV carriers) and the other more humanitarian educative approach. However, the stories that tend to make headlines are the more sensational events about prisoners, homosexuals and prostitutes, giving the public the false image that AIDS is associated with these groups.

The government has also "legitimised" the recommendation of condoms as one of the preventive measures. Television could now use the word "condom" on air which until 1991 was a banned word. However, because of the moralistic stance of some newspapers, safe sex including the use of condom is not openly reported as a recommended preventive measure.

Given the way AIDS virus spread, it is not a disease that can be wished away. AIDS has a human face - the infected newly-born, married women, haemophiliac, middle-class young executive, single factory worker, businessmen, etc., those that the Malaysian public can identify with. We, no longer, can adopt a distant and moralistic attitude. It is not a problem of a few but one that will affect all, whether we like it or not.

Bibliography

- Freimuth, V.S., Hammond, S.L., Edgar, J. and Monahan, J.L. 1990. Reaching those at risk, *Communication Research*, Vol. 17, No. 6. pp 775-791.
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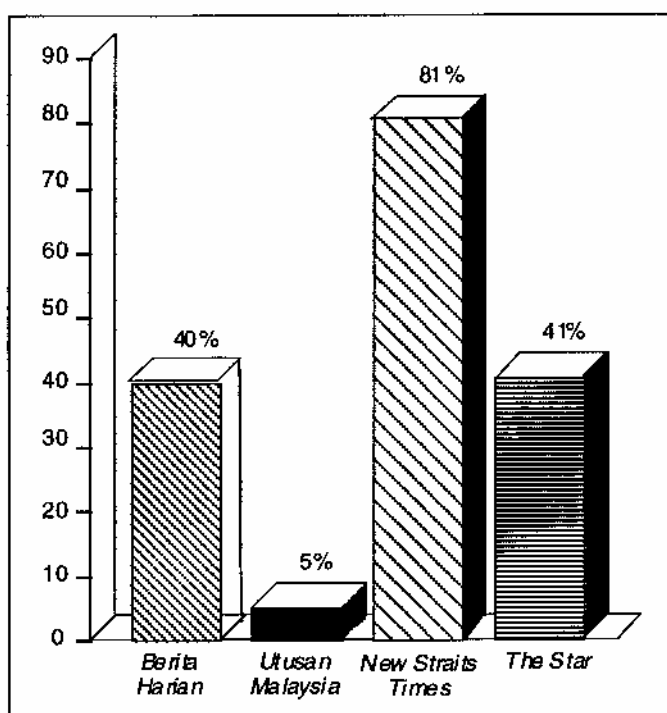


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