

# Crisis Management in Danish Journalism

## *The Poetics of Media Epidemics*

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Mass media coverage of HIV as a life threatening epidemic can be viewed as a *crisis* not only in the medical and political sense, but also in the theatrical sense, i.e. a spectacular turn of events in an ongoing plot. These poetic aspects of modern journalism gives important clues to the understanding of the flow of episodic mass communication as vehicle for management of public disorder. It also calls for revisions in relation to traditional research on modern developments of the public sphere (Habermas 1962 and 1973).

European press research has mainly treated HIV/AIDS journalism in the British tradition: *A moral panic* where agenda-setting is analyzed at the level of the individual news stories, i.e. as contemplated sets of professional practices reflected in different news values of public and commercial broadcasting, serious broadsheets versus sensationalist tabloids (e.g. Adams, 1989; Berridge, 1992; Lupton, 1994; Miller & Williams, 1993; Steffen, 1993; Watney, 1987; Wellings, 1988).

In contrast to the British focus on episodic media panics, researchers from the United States of America primarily investigate agenda-setting on the aggregate and epidemic level. Rogers & Dearing (1988 and 1991) have surveyed the American research on mass mediated HIV/AIDS coverage claiming that journalists have not been successful in telling people what to think, but in telling their readers what to think about. Viewed in this perspective AIDS may be regarded as a successful diffusion of an innovation in a complex social system of conflicting interests.

In my dissertation (Lund, 1997) I have combined the two agenda setting perspectives by analyzing the coverage of episodic epidemics (tuberculosis, syphi-

lis, influenza, polio, and HIV) from the late 1890s until the early 1990s in genealogical context inspired by Michel Foucault (1975 and 1976). My research can be viewed as a contribution to the Scandinavian tradition documenting patterns of serialized episodes prevalent in the current media flow (Eide & Hernes, 1989; Ekecrantz & Olsson, 1994; Jarlbro & Windahl, 1993). My key question here – illustrated by the Danish media coverage of HIV/AIDS 1981-1993 – is how poetic plots direct the agenda setting of professional journalism and how these pre-modern features may influence rational management of public crisis?

### Staging an Epidemic

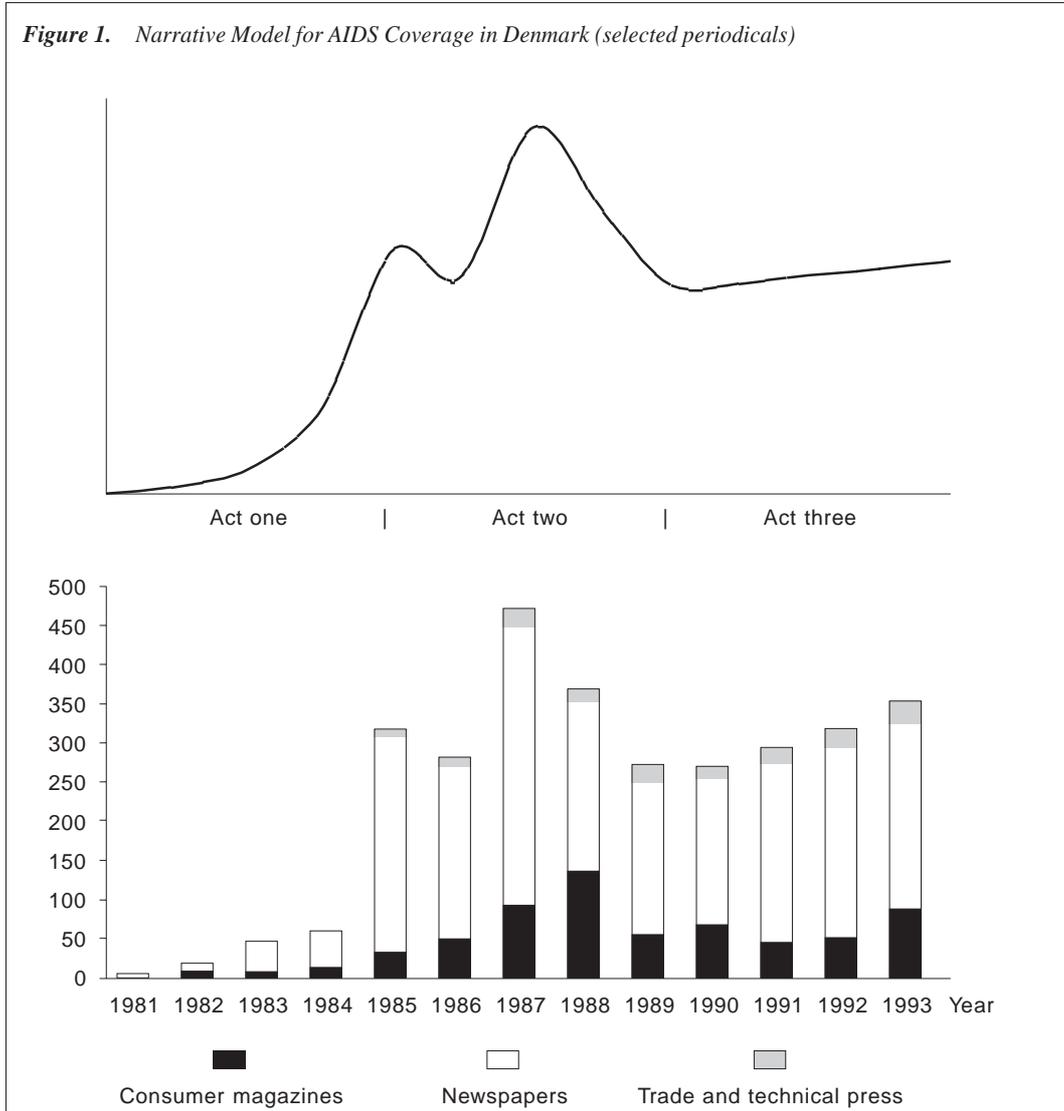
In order to discuss agenda setting aspects of poetic performance by Danish mass media, content analyses have been conducted based upon 3340 items (1981-1993) with references to HIV/AIDS published by nationally distributed periodicals. Computed on a yearly basis, we find a slow build-up towards a dramatic *point of no return*. Almost four years passed from the first sporadic press references in the Fall of 1981 before AIDS developed into a contagious term within Danish journalism, spreading from the ghetto of medical columns to most other editorial beats. Since the HIV-epidemic made headline news in 1985, AIDS has kept a high priority position on the media agenda. After this slow growth rate in media coverage, an absolute climax in Danish press coverage was reached in 1987. Then the level of news coverage declined onto a plateau of serial action.

This slow rise, followed by an unusual lack of decisive decline, are two important elements that make AIDS a particularly interesting object for agenda-setting research. The Danish media coverage of HIV/AIDS may be viewed as three success-

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**Figure 1.** Narrative Model for AIDS Coverage in Denmark (selected periodicals)



ive phases of staged drama: A prelude starting in 1981-82, a climax reached in 1987-88, followed by the period of frustrated waiting characterizing the 1990s. Using terms such as *staging* and *drama* I do not, of course, mean to ridicule or minimize the medical and social importance of AIDS. But as editors, journalists, health educators, and the general public interpret horror and hope in such terms (Lund & Jepsen, 1994), I claim that only by candidly reflecting upon latent poetic plots and actions is it possible to deal with mass mediated crisis in a critical manner.

The mere resemblance at the aggregate level of media coverage and traditional stages of drama could, of course, be accidental. I shall argue, how-

ever, that pre-modern traditions of classical poetics are reflected in the staging of the epidemic. In order to illustrate how the quantitative development has been conceived, newspaper articles with reference to HIV/AIDS from an influential broadsheet (*Politiken*) and a tabloid (*B.T.*) have been selected for qualitative content analysis.

### Act One: Suspicion and Suspense

The first announcements of the new potential epidemic appeared in the Danish press by late Fall of 1981 under headlines such as "Gays hit by rare cancer" and "Occupational disease among homosexuals". There was no media panic, and AIDS did not

make frontpage news. The Danish press reassured the public that the syndrome was limited to specific “risk groups”.

In April 1984 American health authorities published HIV (HLTV-III/LAV) as the cause of AIDS. The identification of a specific retrovirus and the introduction of antibody tests signified greater visibility of the epidemic (“The mystery of AIDS has been solved”). But the virological messages were only given limited news coverage, e.g. brief notices that state that the “AIDS-test” was now available to “anyone who is uncertain”.

Until the summer of 1985, news of the syndrome was sparse and scattered. AIDS at this point was still considered an exotic problem, confined to “the inner city” and “the gay community”. The two newspapers of the sample published an average of 3 articles on AIDS per month from 1981 until the summer of 1985, as compared to 39 per month during the last six months of 1985. Three events can be identified as causes for this spectacular increase. In July 1985 the American Hospital in Paris disclosed that movie actor Rock Hudson was dying from AIDS-related illnesses. The Hudson-incident coincided with the introduction of a new “risk group” on the media agenda. From the beginning of 1985, the organization of Danish hemophiliacs had been lobbying for effective screening of blood products. On September 3, 1985, a story broke on national television and hemophiliacs got top billing on the political agenda. In this case, the casting was national, but the plot international. The story of the Danish hemophiliacs coincided with American news about Ryan White, the 13-year-old “AIDS-positive” school boy from Indiana who was banned from his school.

These event not only promoted an increase in the press coverage, but the tone of reportage also changed: “Now AIDS can overtake all of us”. The implicit issue became “innocent victims” and explicit demands for screening of donor blood placing AIDS permanently on the Danish media agenda. In this fashion, celebrities and children with AIDS were given important roles in the epidemic. 1985 was also the year when the mass media introduced antibody positive prostitutes. News telegrams from Africa similarly pointed to greater risk for the heterosexual part of the so-called general population. The focus of the media coverage was transferred from particular “risk groups” to more general questions of modes of transmission and risk behavior.

Most Danish media contributions presented AIDS in a lifestyle perspective (“The death route: Africa – Haiti – San Francisco – Copenhagen”) with

“The Green Monkey” in the leading role, orchestrated by descriptions of “primitive methods of circumcision” and lack of hygiene. Behind the scenes “Haitian foreign workers in Zaire” and “American brothel customers in Haiti” acted as “the missing link”. Other possible mass mediated causes were “the one-night stand”, “life in the fast lane”, “ecological crisis”, “the huge consumption of antibiotics”, and “drug abuse”. Conspiracy theories were introduced: “AIDS-virus artificially created by American scientists”, “Moscow’s new secret weapon”, “AIDS is a result of gene splicing”.

The demand for comprehensive AIDS information campaigns became increasingly politicized during the fall of 1985: “Information, information and more information” was the battle cry. Metaphors of war gradually replaced plague-metaphors. A minority of politicians demanding an alternative strategy of “mandatory screening of suspects” opposed this educational line of action. Another minority wanted to wait and see, referring repeatedly to optimistic announcements of a coming vaccine (“In five years at the latest”). But the information strategy won – carried by massive support from the mass media.

## Act Two: Great Expectations

In an opinion poll published on November 28, 1985, a majority of Danes pointed to AIDS as “the worst health problem of our time”. In the Prime Minister’s New Year’s speech a month later, AIDS was appointed the number one social problem. A special task force was funded and great expectations were invested in the health education campaigns, set into motion by 1987: “We believe that AIDS is a threat to the whole population. We are not to frighten unnecessarily nor create panic. But the seriousness of the situation is to be communicated widely and sensibly. Young people in particular will be an important target group,” read the official strategy,

The high hopes were further fueled by an ongoing controversy over information versus registration, culminating in a proposal for the Danish Parliament to classify AIDS within the Venereal Disease Act. This, however, was rejected by a political majority; instead, the VD-Act was abolished, interpreted by the press as yet another confirmation of the validity of an information strategy. Also counting in favour of the campaign was the claim that tax-money could be saved if the educational effort succeeded.

The average number of AIDS related items in the two newspapers of the sample were 22 per month in

the period 1986-1988. Massive media attention hailed the first official Danish AIDS campaign that explicitly focused on use of condoms as an individual means to prevent infection. A carefully planned interplay with journalistic coverage was conducted by the Health Authorities. The press celebrated that Denmark ("in opposition to certain places abroad") chose a humorous angle instead of a fear based campaign. The events were reported as signs of an international crisis, lending authority to an unprecedented cooperation between paid and editorial AIDS information launched on radio and television in 1987-88. A climax was reached with a television program in prime-time February 14, 1988; titled "Love and Condoms" it included a show of intercourse *in vivo* as part of the demonstration of heterosexual "safe sex". This program was watched by 2.7 million Danes (more than half of the population).

The media interest was tense. Viewed in an agenda-setting perspective these press reactions were particularly interesting because the media coverage did not strike a tone of scandal or panic, nor take advantage of a growing controversy within the medical corps. Consensus rather than conflict became the name of the game. The vast amount of televised AIDS spots shown in January and February 1988, starring well-known politicians, actors and musicians in the comic roles, were positively echoed in the printed press. Beforehand there had been criticism of the electronic media's passivity and slowness; now, praise and hope for a successful stop to the epidemic was voiced by most mass media.

Then by the end of 1988 the massive electronic media efforts stopped as abruptly as they started. At this time doubts about the public management of the AIDS-crisis crept into the printed press. Skepticism was first voiced on the tabloids. Gradually, more journalists pleaded for "a more serious tone". The official AIDS campaign was criticized for "incredibility", "merely scraping the surface with condoms", and "a nursery attitude" which might lead to "ignorance". The spectacular British "Don't Die of Ignorance" (fear-based) AIDS campaign echoed across the North Sea. The Swedish approach to crisis management was frequently reported as a more promising than the Danish information strategy. The main theme of the Danish AIDS agenda became "lack of credibility" aimed at the official AIDS-campaign. An important side theme was whether professional journalists should actively take part in correcting sexual behavior in line with the health authorities or rather act as critical watchdog – especially in times of crisis.

### **Act Three: Waiting for the Vaccine**

After 1988, the prognoses for the AIDS-epidemic were reconsidered and adjusted. Statistics now appeared less alarming. The explosive spread of the infection did not reach the level expected by the health authorities. Reports on a slowing down of the epidemic were transformed into optimistic headlines: "AIDS on the way down", "Change of lifestyle gives hope that AIDS can be stopped", "AIDS vaccine on the way". Revised epidemiological prognoses were interpreted by the health authorities as proof that the general AIDS campaign succeeded and therefore should be carried on. Critical journalists, however, also reported this medical evidence as an argument to wind up the effort: "The era of the big campaigns is over", wrote the broadsheet. "No longer any reason to frighten people," the tabloid concluded.

Politically these views were reflected at the presentation of the Government's 1988 Health Plan, in which AIDS had been replaced by competing issues. This, in turn, results in fewer resources for AIDS educational efforts. The "normalization", however, did not put an end to AIDS as a popular topic in the Danish press: The volume of HIV/AIDS articles stabilized on an average number of 18 items per month for the period 1989-1993. In this process, some of the mass mediated optimism regarding health education as the means of stopping the epidemic receded. In retrospect, the popular AIDS campaign met press condemnation. Journalists now considered voluntary health information in the mass media to be "press prostitution", threatening professional standards of critical journalism. Commentary focused on lack of credibility: "Are condoms actually safe?". "Why has the sale of preservatives not exploded?" "Why don't we do what the authorities say we should be doing?"

Controversies about screening of blood products, lack of efficiency by the health authorities, and condemnation of "unsafe behavior" among HIV-positives now dominated the media agenda. The so-called "blood-scandals" transfused media interest away from other HIV/AIDS problems. In this late phase, press reactions more frequently stroked a tone of panic and scandal, covering controversy within the medical corps and legal procedure which was rarely the case in the times of national crisis of the mid 1980s. Media attention shifted from national to international aspects. In the fall of 1990 Thailand was put on the media agenda with stories of prostitution and "sex-tourism". In the preceding period "The tragedy of Rumanian children" was given

substantial space. Later on in the 1990s, AIDS was reported as “The forgotten disease”.

At the same time HIV and AIDS increasingly became part of the everyday universe of *soft* news. Individual patients told their private stories of hope and fear. Promising prospects for a coming vaccine was the dramatic motor. Another important mechanism for mass mediated continuance were introduction of new actors onto the scene. Most successfully, the World Health Organization (WHO) used the international AIDS Day in 1990 to place women and HIV on the agenda. In the Danish press sample, women were mentioned as individuals at risk in less than one percent of the items before December 1990, as compared to nine percent after the WHO warning. This marked chance made women the most frequently portrayed risk group in the press. Homosexuals, on the other hand, became invisible in the AIDS reporting after the massive campaigns in the late 1980s, even though they still dominated HIV- and AIDS-statistics. In this fashion, newspaper coverage emphasized that heterosexual risk was the most important issue on the AIDS agenda: “All women risk HIV infection”, “My boyfriend passed HIV on to me”, “The gay-disease has spread to women”.

In this fashion specific case stories casting “the guilty” against “the innocent victim” in plots of sexual crime and punishment becomes epidemically salient. Gone were the plague-metaphors and the battle cries of war for collective action. In spite of the ritually repeated press releases that expressed hopes for a medical cure and for an effective preventive vaccine, time passed on and no final solutions to the problem were at hand.

### **Crisis Management**

To sum up, in the early 1980s Danish mass media considered AIDS an exotic syndrome, foreign to the general population. During the period of intensive health education efforts, AIDS was turned into “everybody’s problem” and “safe sex” grew synonymous with “use a condom”. Such private solutions, however, did not solve the public problems: The media were left in limbo. One would expect a decline in coverage after the alleged crisis had been called off, and indeed it did come. But during the 1990s the press coverage remained on a relative high level compared to other health issues.

AIDS matured into a metaphor in their own right. When a topic is unfamiliar to journalists, mass media tend to domesticate the unknown by borrowing items from more familiar areas of press coverage

(Volinn 1989). Later on the terms need no longer be qualified by external metaphors. e.g. “gay-plague” and “killer-disease”. Instead, HIV and AIDS are exported to other fields of media coverage as a fundamental symbol of hope and fear, risk and crisis. A frame of reference inspired by Jürgen Habermas makes it possible to conceive this process as a mass mediated search for communicative consensus.

The key features of Habermas’ impressive work on the rise and fall of public man has been the birth of modernity and the quest for rationality in public matters. Habermas (1962) views newscasting historically as media for public debate and political coordination. In contrast to arcane government, the public sphere offers representative participation in political decision-making processes. According to Habermas, this authoritative allocation of values for rationalization of human actions has been gradually transformed into a systems of legal regulations and communicative action. When social interventions do not satisfy public expectations, however, representative government lose credibility and policy making may pass through crises of legitimacy and rationality (Habermas 1973).

In his later works Habermas have turned from this sociological point of view towards philosophical aspects of discourse and communicative action. Consequently, we are left with little theoretical assistance when it comes to understanding *how* modern society manage public crisis. In this respect, agenda setting research call attention to the important function of mass communication in pointing out risks and problems for political action. Mass media also relieve pressure providing the public with outlets for hopes and fear, dreams and unresolved conflicts (Lund, 1997).

Mass mediating epidemics involve at least four media strategies: As was initially the case with AIDS journalists may manage the crisis by *ignoring the problem*. Secondly, crisis can be dealt with by communicative action in the Habermasian sense placing the issue on the political agenda for *public coordination of collective action*. Thirdly, the media may to aid the authorities by *correcting private or public actions* saving potential victims and hunting villains (or scapegoats). Notably in the AIDS-case dramatic turnabouts took place casting former heroes as villains and vice versa. Finally, crisis may be managed in mass media by *domesticating the problem*. This trend in modern newscasting reflects features from fictional *soap operas*, where a succession of (un)related events are presented and suspense maintained by cliffhangers in order to make the audience continually tune in for new episodes in con-

stant pursuit of *happy end* – no matter how unlikely in view of the preceding scenes.

In this process, modern journalism produces identification and sensation by making private issues public, and public issues private. On this important point the work of Michel Foucault can supplement Habermas' theory of the public sphere. Foucault does not accept communicative rationality as the "invisible hand managing modernity", but stresses discursive dialectics consisting of conflicting power relations. His genealogical writings (Foucault 1975 and 1976) enables us to understand the poetics of modern journalism as correctional and domesticating efforts targeted at the general public involving power-relation generating discursive plots of emancipation and repression.

Correction of private action related to communicable diseases has always been a newsworthy issue in modern mass media with important political implications. According to the constitutional premises of representative government, the state must respect the privacy of its citizens. In the public sphere, free and equal citizens coordinate action for the common good. Around the turn of the century, the so-called modern breakthroughs in bacteriology enabled health professionals to translate basic scientific knowledge into specific causes and cures related to communicable diseases. Mono-causality and biomedical interventions became the popularized foundation for the public control of communicable diseases lending hopes for research-based coordination of action in other areas of society.

During the First World War mass vaccinations, trench infections, and an influenza-pandemic further increased public acclaim placing bacteriological theory as scientific *doxa*. Metaphorical associations, i.e. contagiousness, pollution, resistance, immunity, mutation, disinfection and sterilization, were translated from common language into medical jargon and back to public discourse as authoritative foundations for rational coordination of individual and collective action. From the 1940s optimism was mass communicated in relation to technological solutions to health problems. With American news agencies as agenda-setters, journalists world wide reported enthusiastically on the approaching extermination of life-threatening diseases. The rational prevention and treatment of communicable diseases were staged as striking arguments for a modern victory of biomedical science promising a global *pax antibiotica*. It was argued that only political inertia and lack of funding blocked *Approach Zero* heralded by mass production of vaccines and penicillin.

The new communicable diseases of the 1980s were mass mediated as especially frightening against the background of post-war hopes. The AIDS crisis illustrates that the media agenda was not set strictly by rational consensus formation based on communicative action. The media move from ignoring the problem to mass mobilization should rather be viewed as the net results of power-relations involving health professionals, risk groups and political representatives. The staging of an international HIV-epidemic reflects the plot of a Hollywood melodrama: a slow build up of conflicts leading to a point of no return and due to the lack of happy end left in the limbo of episodic seriality of mass mediated events. Similar features can also be identified in a number of other cases involving health and illness (e.g. Eide & Hernes, 1989, and Karp, 1988).

In the Habermasian tradition such trends may be viewed as symptoms of decline of rational coordination in the public sphere. Alternatively, based on Foucault, the poetic features may be regarded as a new mode in an ongoing transformation of the public sphere, i.e. correction of private actions in order to domesticate public crisis. This point of view has been supported by sociological research (Beck, 1986 and Furedi, 1997) documenting how a growing number of risk factors are being mass mediated as potential causes of public crises, placing professional journalists in an influential gatekeeping role. Mass communication staged as crisis management both stimulate and block collective action. In this respect, journalistic choice of newsworthy sources and dramatic narratives constitute important conditions for coordination and corrective actions.

Until the end of the 1960s, Danish mass media reserved privileged speaking parts for elected representatives and professional experts with formal authority when communicable diseases set the public agenda. Actors without professional credentials or representative mandate were cast as objects for public authorities. In the last quarter of this century, however, newspapers have placed private lay people in more prominent speech positions. In this process, communicative ideals about rational consensus formation in the public sphere have been markedly changed. The mass mediated focus on private citizens as "experts on the consequences" makes it difficult to comprehend agenda setting as *communicative action* in Habermasian terms. Habermas' theory of the public sphere is blindfolded when it comes to poetic action in pre-negotiated plots setting scenes for crisis management and correctional actions.

Acting as directors of media dramas, professional journalists, knowingly or not, instigate and manage public crisis by inviting a variety of social actors to react to each others actions. As it has been shown with the AIDS-case actions and reactions take place in an arena where pre-negotiated premisses limit rational problem solving. In the mediation process, selected actors become heroes while other parties are cast as villains. Private citizens graduated from passive objects to active speech positions in changing associations rendering others to heretical status losing former privileges in the course of public discourse. Paraphrasing Foucault (1975:303): The theory of communicative action can only explain this development by “the fiction of a juridical subject” giving the media power to exercise over the public – a power that the public (cast in changing roles of potential victims and villains) already possesses over the media.

In this dialectic perspective, journalism may be regarded as routine use of frames for crisis management on behalf of a public audience. Such frames are not, however, chosen randomly neither by the individual journalists, nor by their sources (Ekecrantz, 1997). A given reporter and his or her collaborators play a variety of roles, but the collective textual action open to them is limited by poetics vested in professional norms and modified by the plot of the agenda in play. In order to last more than a few days, mass mediated crisis aim at a dramatic turning point. In terms of classical poetics the notion of *point of no return* contains a more fundamentally quest for *katharsis*. i.e. a *change of fate* in contrast to simple episodic narratives.

Conflicts between *Endlösung* and the flow of episodic *soap* can continuously (but only temporarily)

be resolved in public discourse dominated by newsworthy associations consisting of health professionals, journalists, and representatives for potential patients. The frame of reference inspired by Jürgen Habermas cannot explain these processes. Supplemented by Foucault, however, the theory of the public sphere is no longer reduced to structures of speech acts leading to rational consensus formation. Cast in the Foucaultian mode, public discourse staged by mass media direct the flow of news limiting the register of meaningful interpretations of the situational reality during times of crisis. Given the opportunity to influence what should be counted as rational and meaningful in public decision-making processes, professional journalists themselves play an important dual role as correcting managers and coordinating representatives of public opinion.

In conclusion, the theoretical conception of the public sphere should be regarded as an ideal type consisting of conflicting power relations involving not only communicative, but also poetic modes of action. Consequently, crisis management of modern journalism is not merely a question of rational progress or decline. Poetic structures inherent to public discourse make probable the occurrence of both prior and future events. In so doing, modern journalism is strongly influenced by spectacular plots derived from classical tragedy and comedy. Professional journalists subscribing to objectivity and rational presentation of events have failed to exclude these pre-modern elements of poetics from rational consensus forming. In short, dealing with crisis management, e.g. when an epidemic is set on the public agenda, modern mass communication has never been modern.

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