

HIV/AIDS  
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**INP+**  
INDIAN NETWORK  
FOR PEOPLE LIVING  
WITH HIV / AIDS

**NACO**

**i am  
positive...  
you are  
O.K.**

**i am +ve  
i am responsible**

**"i am positive-i am responsible"** is a positive response from people living with HIV.

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# MAPPING THE MEDIA

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**H**IV/AIDS has definitely arrived on the Indian media map. Though few quantitative or qualitative surveys have been conducted on the Indian news media's coverage of the epidemic, there is agreement that the amount of coverage has grown over the years. HIV/AIDS-related stories in newspapers and magazines, and on television, are frequent, and reach a peak during high-profile events. Non-news media—entertainment television, films, advertising, and websites—have also begun to play an important role.

However, the view persists that HIV/AIDS coverage (especially in the news media) leaves a lot to be desired. Adjectives such as inadequate, ill-informed, insensitive, sensationalist, stigmatizing, and unethical continue to be applied to media coverage.

This chapter examines what's happening in media, including non-news media, and also explains why media coverage of HIV/AIDS is criticized.

## Milestones

### CO-PRODUCTION INITIATIVE

India's state broadcaster, Doordarshan, is one of 14 national broadcasters who came together in August 2005 to co-produce television programmes on HIV/AIDS. Participating broadcasters will create segments to be packaged together as 'HIV/AIDS Reports', which will air in the different countries. The reports will focus on the implications of the epidemic with

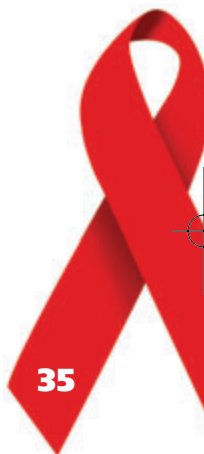
emphasis on the human or social dimension. The initiative was organized jointly by the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU), UNDP, UNAIDS, UNICEF, MTV International, and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

### THE HEROES PROJECT

The Heroes Project, which was launched by Richard Gere and Parmeshwar Godrej in July 2004, is a three-year campaign to produce and broadcast public service messages on HIV/AIDS in India. The initiative is funded by The Gere Foundation India Trust, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and STAR India. The imaginatively produced television messages include:



Richard Gere





■ **Dressing Room**, featuring cricketer Rahul Dravid padding up for the pitch and delivering the message that it would be foolish to not use protection: “Use a condom. Every time”;

■ **Fans**, Dravid mixing with fans: “AIDS cannot spread with a touch, but what a touch can spread is a lot of happiness”;

■ **Two Flowers and a Game of Carom**: Young couples who end up doing things other than they set



Rahul Dravid

out to do: “No condom, no sex”;

■ **It Can Happen to Anyone**: Anchored by actor Amitabh Bachchan, it shows people from different classes saying it doesn’t happen in our society: “Inform yourself, get to know more about AIDS”;

■ **Let’s Talk about AIDS**: Also anchored by Amitabh Bachchan, shows a family man sending his children out of the room on errands when the subject of AIDS appears on television: “With knowledge, we can stop the spread of AIDS. So let’s start talking about it with our families, within our homes”;

■ **Talking with Young People**: Mothers subtly attracting the attention of their children to a

## Bency and Benson’s Battle against Discrimination

Bency and Benson came into the media spotlight in 2003, when their quest for education became a national question mark. Bency, then 7, and Benson, then 5, were born to HIV+ parents in Kerala, who died within a short span of each other, leaving the children to be brought up by their maternal grandparents.

When five schools refused the children admission because they, too, were HIV+, they and their grandfather went on a day-long fast outside Kerala chief minister A K Antony’s office. Antony intervened on their behalf and got them admitted into the government school at Kollam. However, the parents of the other students in the school protested, and kept their children away from school.

Finally, Kerala education minister Nalakat Soopy announced that Bency and Benson would be schooled at home at the state government’s expense. Later, the President of India, A P J Abdul Kalam, also met the children and their grandfather.

In April 2005, Bency and Benson were on the cricket pitch in Kochi—shaking hands with captains Saurav Ganguly and Inzamam-ul-Haq before a one-day international between India and Pakistan. Kerala has one of the highest literacy levels among the states of India, which is why the depth of ignorance about HIV/AIDS among the people there, as evidenced in the ostracism of Bency and Benson, was so shocking.

radio programme, magazine, and poster: “There are many ways to start a conversation, but the important thing is to talk to your children about HIV/AIDS”.

## JASOOS VIJAY AND HAATH SE HAATH MILAA

In 2002, Doordarshan, the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), and the BBC World Service Trust joined hands to produce television programmes—the detective drama, *Jasoos Vijay*, and a reality show called *Haath Se Haath Milaa*.



Farhan Khan as *Jasoos Vijay*

This was the first mass-media campaign on HIV/AIDS in India and was hugely successful. The award-winning *Jasoos Vijay*, which is estimated to have reached 125 million people, returned in September 2005 to a prime-time slot on Doordarshan National in Hindi and seven other languages.

### SOAPS

Though HIV/AIDS has not impacted the story lines of soap operas on Indian television, “socially responsible” soaps have attracted viewers and listeners and helped educate them in many countries. In Brazil, home of the ‘telenovela’, *Malhação (Working Out)* dealt with issues facing young people. One of the most keenly watched programmes in Nicaragua is *Sexto Sentido (Sixth Sense)*, a hard-hitting programme that tackles sexuality, rape, domestic violence, and substance abuse. When NHK in Japan aired a serial called *Kamisama Mo Sukoshidake (Please God, Just a Little More Time)*, about a schoolgirl who was infected after becoming a sex worker, the number of HIV tests and requests for counselling more than doubled. In China, *Bai Xing (Ordinary People)* follows the struggles of a family as they tackle many issues, including HIV/AIDS. *Bai Xing* has proved a popular and award-winning show. In Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa, radio has proved a powerful medium.

### MTV'S STAYING ALIVE

*Staying Alive* began on MTV in 1998 as an Emmy award-winning documentary profiling the lives of six young

people from around the world infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS. Growing from the tradition of annual documentaries, *Staying Alive* has expanded to a multi-tiered international campaign to promote awareness about HIV/AIDS. It's the single-largest ongoing global HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaign for young people.

### Campaign Gone Wrong

HIV/AIDS is a sensitive subject, and good intentions may not be enough to prevent causing offence. In February, 200 hoardings put up in five cities in Uttar Pradesh had to be taken down because they were insensitive and stigmatizing. They had been put up by the UP State AIDS Control Society and UNICEF. The messages they put out met with strenuous objections—one of them said: “Hero or Zero? How smart are you? Keep away from AIDS”. Other hoardings used phrases from Hindi movies: “*Khiladi ya Anadi (Skilled or Novice?)*”, “*Dil Chahta Hai (The Heart Desires)*”, and “*Kal Ho Na Ho (There May Be No Tomorrow)*”. Activists and PLWHA made the point that to equate the HIV+ community with “Zero” or “Anadi” was to stigmatize them and to imply that they were somehow at fault.

In 2001, UNICEF had to withdraw an 80-page publication it funded, called *Caste-based Prostitution in India*, after it was pointed out that the booklet seemed to target a specific caste group in India as being given to pimping and prostitution and, therefore, as ‘high-risk’.





**BOLLYWOOD**

India's prolific film industry kicked into gear in August 2004 with the release of *Phir Milenge*, a film about a young advertising executive who gets infected by her boyfriend and her legal battle against discrimination at work. The film was entered for international film awards by UNAIDS. *My Brother Nikhil* was released in March 2005. In this film, the life of a young man from Goa during the early years of the epidemic is the vehicle for exploring misconceptions about HIV/AIDS and its effect on relationships.

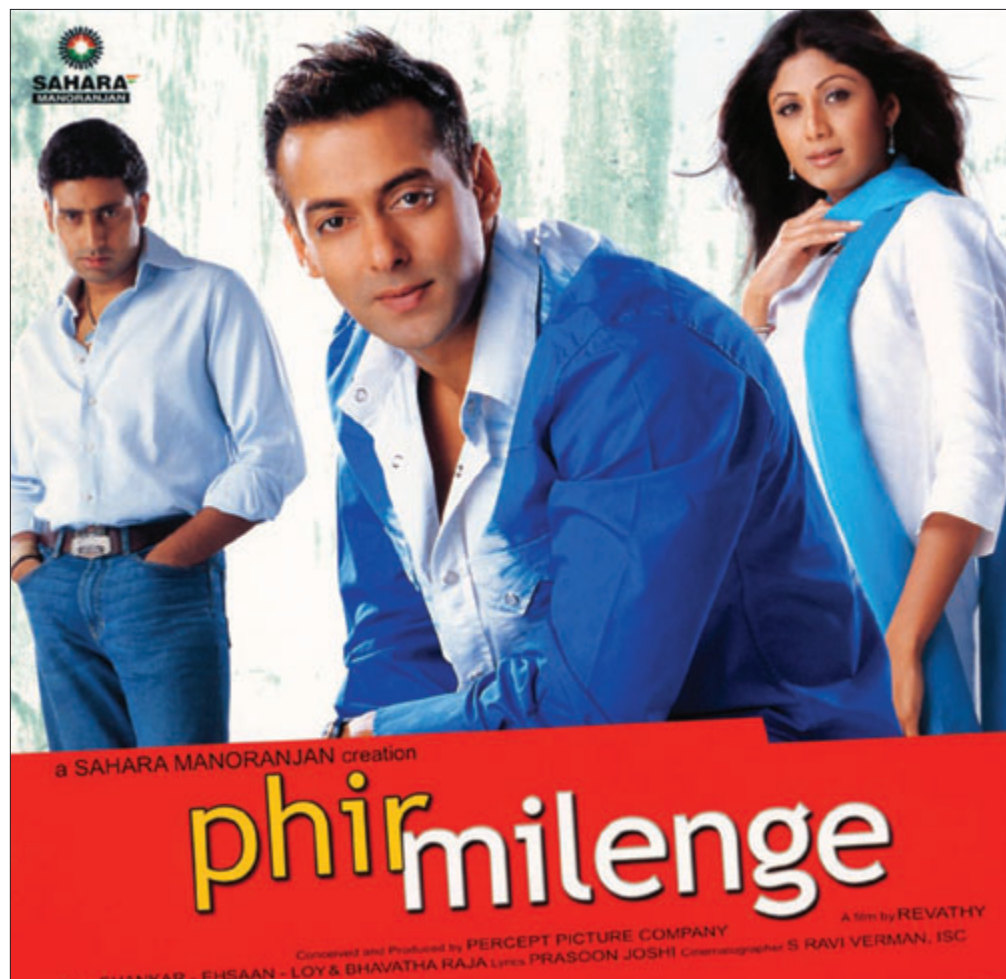
**INTERNATIONAL FILMS**

Hollywood and other film industries, including the Italian and French, have produced at least a

dozen films that deal with HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the best-known in India is the 1993 film, *Philadelphia*, which features Tom Hanks as a lawyer who faces workplace discrimination. Stories centring on the epidemic began to be filmed in the mid-1980s: *An Early Frost*, *Parting Glances*, and *Longtime Companion* are some of the early films. Many of them have been about gay men, reflecting the early mislabelling of HIV/AIDS as the "gay plague".

**SPORTS EVENTS**

Sports has proved to be an effective means of raising awareness about HIV/AIDS. The Buladi Para Football Tournament 2005, held in August in Kolkata, was used as a vehicle to raise awareness about the syndrome by the Indian Football



Association (IFA) and the West Bengal State AIDS Control Society. At each match venue were information stalls and counsellors, who interacted with people, telling them about safer sex and demonstrating the use of condoms.

Buladi is an animated character representing a 30-year-old, middle-class housewife, and she has appeared on billboards, radio, and television, answering questions related to HIV/AIDS.

Cricketer Rahul Dravid began promoting the fight against HIV/AIDS in July 2003 as a member of the India AIDS Initiative Board of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In August 2005, Dravid and two of his teammates, Irfan Pathan and Harbhajan Singh, took time out from their tour schedule in Zimbabwe to meet and play with orphans at a UNICEF-supported education project outside Harare. One in five Zimbabwean children is now an orphan due to HIV/AIDS.

## The PLWHA Perspective

The Indian Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS (INP+) has observed that the amount of media coverage on various aspects of HIV/AIDS has increased noticeably during the last decade, but there has been little change in the images of the epidemic that are conveyed by the media.

“The coverage continues to dwell on disempowering images of death, despair, stigma, abandonment, marginalized groups, or mismanagement of funds or programmes. Though the presence of sensitized media persons is increasing, sensation is still the key word ruling coverage.

Stereotyped reporting patterns and stereotyped sources continue to cause further discrimination of PLWHA,” says the group.

“Harmful stereotypes are portrayed indiscriminately. Stories such as ‘PLWHA stoned to death’, ‘PLWHA committing suicide’, ‘The prisoner who is HIV+’, ‘Husband infects wife without revealing his HIV status’, and so on contribute to promoting a negative image about PLWHA. Words with negative associations, unnecessary dramatization, and pity are widely used by the vernacular media,” it adds.

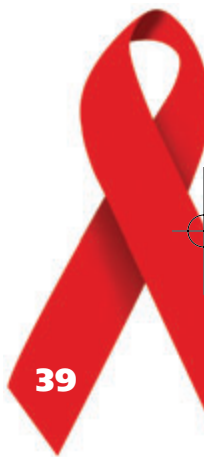
Reporters’ sources and the inclination to depend on a well-known, but limited, bank of sources such as NGOs and some HIV/AIDS experts were pinpointed as problem areas. A disproportionate amount of media coverage is devoted to pre-arranged events and programmes, with a heavy leaning towards celebrity attended events.

### WHAT PLWHA FIND MISSING FROM MEDIA REPORTS:

- The economic cost of HIV/AIDS;
- The social cost of HIV/AIDS;
- The medical cost of AIDS;
- The politics of HIV/AIDS;
- Independent investigative coverage;
- Adequate research; and
- Reports on the availability of ARV drugs and other health facilities for PLWHA.

### WHAT PLWHA WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE MEDIA DO:

- Maintain confidentiality;
- Refrain from sensationalism because it only creates negativity on all sides;
- Avoid understatements and



exaggerations;

■ Avoid inappropriate or outdated terminology—the language of 20 years ago is still being used by some people;

■ Avoid using alarm and fear to alert your audience—not only are they outdated, they fuel stigma and distrust;

■ Update your knowledge;

■ Research your stories;

■ Go beyond the news imperatives and explain the human dimensions of the issue;

■ Build partnerships with those affected by the epidemic; and

■ Advocate the rights of people living with the epidemic. ●

## Issues of Confidentiality

Extracts from a letter by Usha Dey from the Assam Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS:

“On World AIDS Day, December 1, 2004, the counsellor of Dibrugarh VCTC invited us to the centre, saying that the principal of Dibrugarh Medical College and doctors would be present, it will be good for you if you come. At the centre, the doctor and four others started asking questions like, When did you get it? How did you get it? We started to share about our life as usual, thinking that they were all doctors.

They said they will send our photographs to the chief minister and the health minister so that we can get some assistance from the government. We also noticed a man shooting with a video camera. I thought: ‘My economic condition is so bad, and my husband’s CD4 count is only 63 and he has still not started ARV due to lack of money.’ Therefore, allowed them to take our photographs.

The next morning we woke up and saw that two newspapers had printed stories about us. We were shocked and realized that the previous day’s discussions were part of a drama. A popular TV channel, too, carried a story. They changed our names, but not the location.

They exploited and humiliated us, brought upon us the wrath of our community. We earned through a small shop. But after this incident, nobody is coming to our shop, which is affecting our earnings. My four-year-old child’s friends have deserted him. Nobody wants to play with him. When my son went to school, the staff did not allow him to go inside the classroom and he had to sit outside.”

