

Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?

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The AIDs Campaign, what did we learn from it?

“Artistic Activism insisted that visual culture had tremendous power to affect behavioural and political change.” (NLM, Unknown). In my essay, I will research and evaluate on the campaigns that were contemporary in the height of the AIDS epidemic, and I will compare the present campaigns to the past and the impact that each had on the general public. Finally, I will conclude by reviewing of what I have learnt from my research, and whether we saved lives during the AIDS crisis or not. Did graphic design save lives during the AIDS epidemic by raising awareness, or did it incite fear that it caused ignorance?

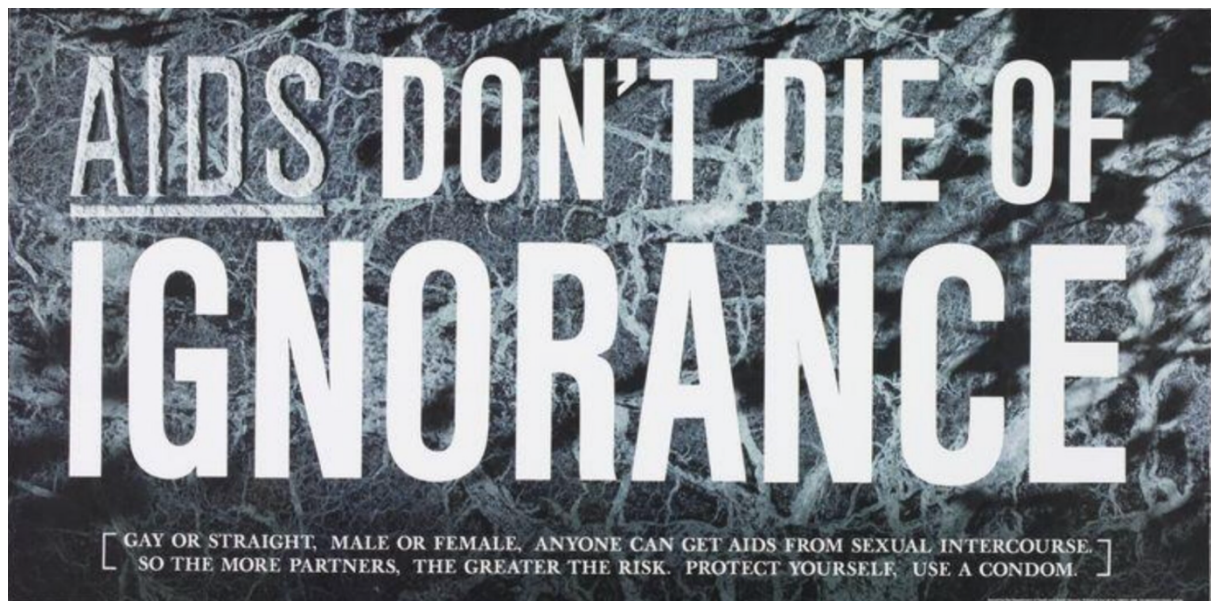


Fig 1. *AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance Campaign, Malcolm Gaskin, 1987*

To illustrate a controversial campaign, I will be exploring the 'AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance Campaign', this is because it had a link to spreading false information, humiliating the

victims who have been diagnosed with the disease, and mocking members of the public who had sex.

As seen in figure 1, this is the 'Don't Die of Ignorance Campaign', which was launched by the UK government in only five months and the biggest campaign the UK has ever seen. "It was designed to alert the public to the urgency of the situation," (Roberts, 2017, p.182-183).

After analysing that piece of information, it has occurred to me that the government had to rush out information which they had limited access to, and that they were on a race against time due to the number of deaths that were occurring in the country. Therefore, graphic designers during the height of the AIDS epidemic had to be persuasive with their messaging, whether this was empathetic or blunt, they would have consequences in either direction.

One of the elements in the campaign was a television advert that was created by Sammy Harari. This is one of the famous campaigns in the UK, and the most easily remembered by those who lived during the epidemic. After watching the advert, and reviewing the campaign, the graphic designers at the height of the epidemic included questionable imagery, and many forms of humiliation. This included "insensitive and victim-blaming captions" (VA, 2023), this decision may have achieved the aim by publishing information of the danger of AIDS, however, it did not offer help and support to those affected or those living with the illness.

"The language of the campaign marked a positive turning point in its acknowledgement that anyone can get it..." (BFI, 2021). This statement that was said by the British Film Institution is correct after the negative and misleading information that was published previously by

the press, it was an improvement and a step in the right direction. However, “the association between homosexuality and disease had been created...” (Buckle, 2018, p. 127). This association between AIDS and the LGBT+ community will be linked together for a long time, the only way that this can be overruled, would be to continue to provide reliable information on the disease to all members of the public, rather than small groups in order to erase the previous stigma.

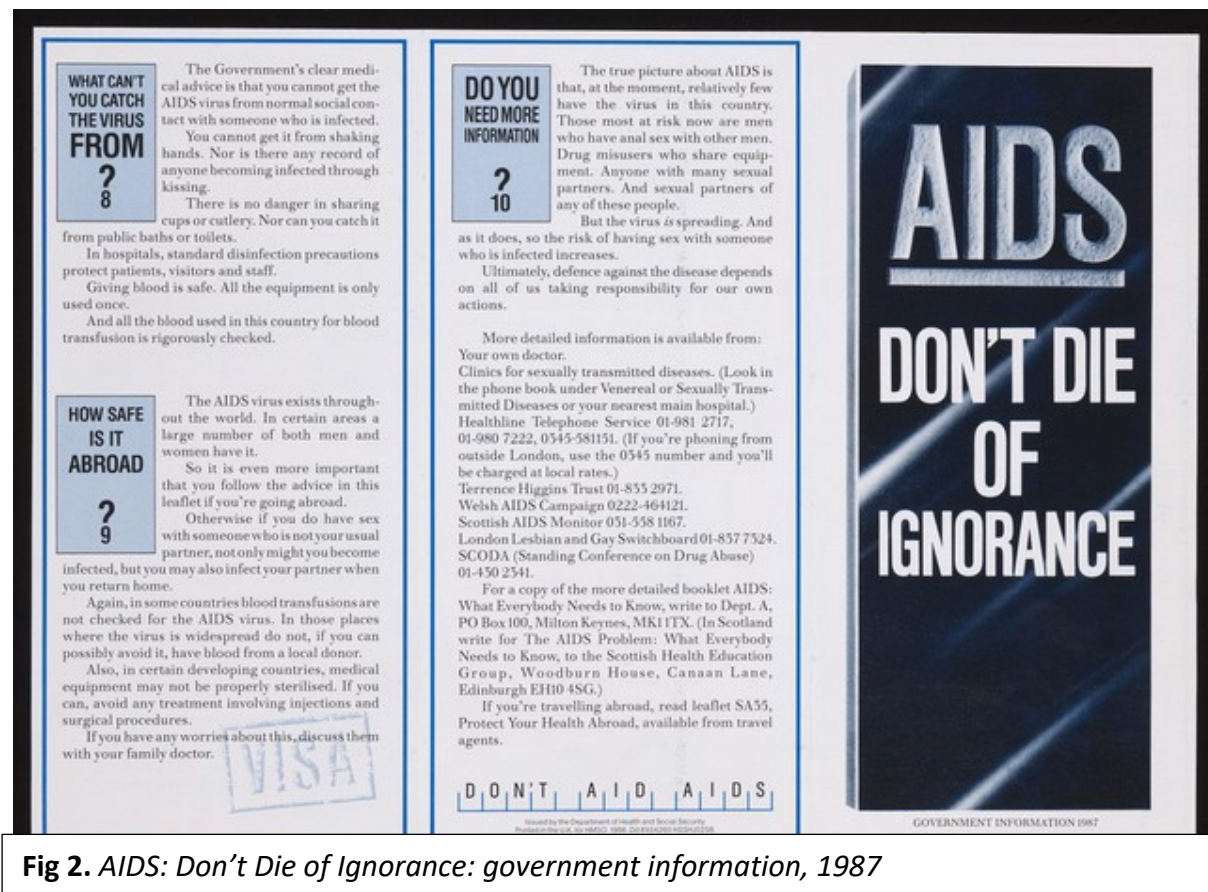


Fig 2. AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance: government information, 1987

Another element of the campaign that was created was a leaflet that was delivered to every household in the country, as seen in figure 2. This method was more personal when a leaflet has been posted through the door, however, it can easily be disposed of if some members

of the public were in denial. Originally, the government was against the idea, mainly from the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “Thatcher’s main objection to the campaign... was that exposing people to risky practices might make them more likely to engage in them.” (Lee, 2017). Even though this was one of the main reasons, it was overruled, and her concerns were proven wrong when sexually transmitted diseases declined after the campaign.

The aim of the leaflet was to make the public aware of the AIDS crisis, and it had the capability to “persuade members of the public to change their behaviour.” (Elizabeth, 2020), and after evaluating both sides of whether it had a positive or negative effect, I think it links to both. This is because that due to the lack of information about the disease, the government had to focus on one attribute to drive their campaign forward, however, it achieved the goal that they had by it still being remembered 40 years later by members of the public who lived throughout the epidemic, or even people that were born afterwards.

On the other hand, there were some positive campaigns during the height of the epidemic, one of these campaigns was started by gay communities because of the enragement of the government's silence. This was one of the first worldwide campaigns, and what kick started the LGBT+ Rights act, was the AIDS activist group called 'ACT UP'. 'ACT UP' stands for 'AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power', and they were created due to the treatment, lack of medical care, and awareness that the government was implementing on AIDS victims and the disease.

Even though it was fighting to end the AIDS crisis, but it felt the need to fight "corporate greed, lack of solidarity at home and abroad." (ACT UP NY, 2023). The campaign's mission is to meet with government officials to discuss the latest medical information and protesting to not stay silent as it is still an ongoing fight.

As seen in figure 3, this is the poster for the 'Silence=Death Project', which was "devised by six gay activists who designed and fly-posted this poster in prominent sites around New York" (Roberts, 2017, p. 186-187). Due to the poster's creation by members of the gay community, it makes it more personal, and it has the capability of

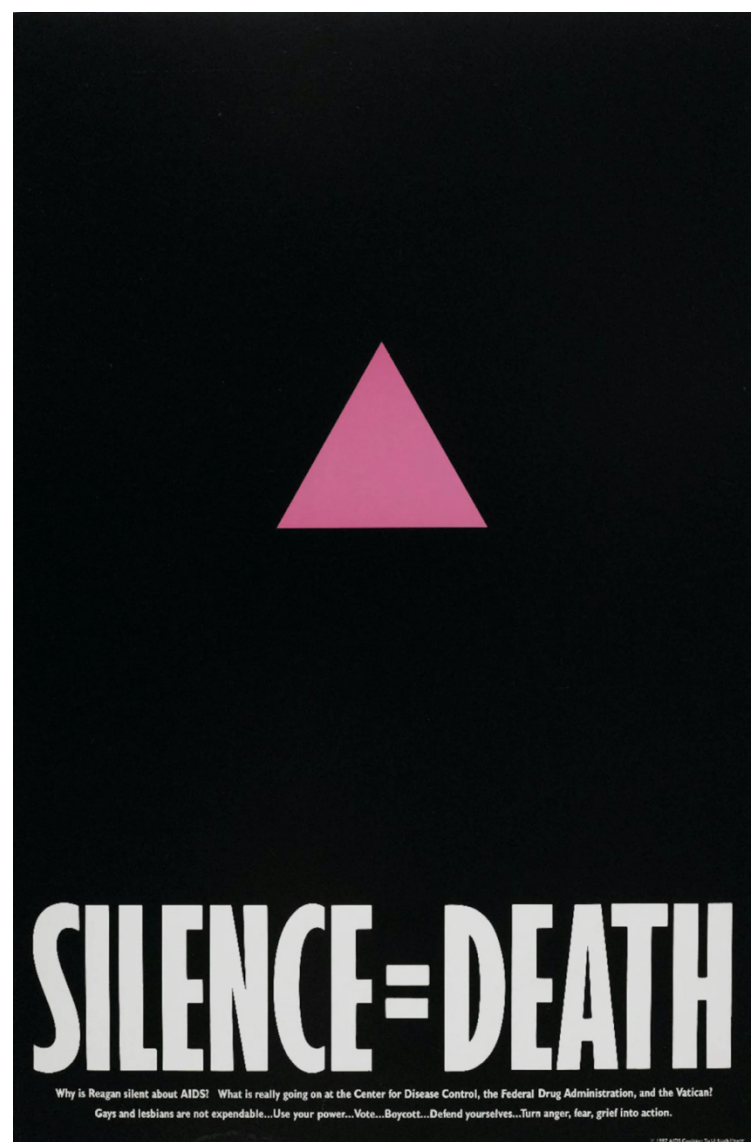


Fig 3. *Silence = Death Poster, Gran Fury, 1987*

portraying the aggressive message that it wants to send, in other words, it is representing the gay community. Although this campaign poster was created by the six individuals, it was then adopted by 'ACT UP' in mere weeks of the poster's creation. Donna Binder, who is a photojournalist that shot many of ACT UP's protests told W that "this was important. It was dire, people were dying. It was a desperate movement because it was a race against time." (Cruz, 2022). This explains that the poster was an act of desperation from the community, they wanted to be heard and wanted the government to act, so they used various methods to raise awareness.

One of these methods that 'ACT UP' used was a "mass die-in... which involves protestors carrying cross and lying on the ground completely still as though dead." (Bishopsgate Institute, 2023). This method was used in London against The Sunday Telegraph who attacked the LGBTQ+ community through its misinterpretation of people infected by AIDS. This action justifies my statement due to misleading information can cause ignorance and anger when people want an opportunity to blame someone when it is clearly out of control, and no one's fault. Appropriate to the police's brutality, this method's success was improved due to witnesses seeing the peaceful protestors get arrested and beaten when they were situated outside government buildings, hospitals and streets that they thought were responsible, this protest was to visually showcase the "government's handling of AIDS" ('Episode 4', 2021), as it was aired on 'It's A Sin' on Netflix.

THE GOVERNMENT HAS BLOOD ON ITS HANDS



Fig 4. *The Government Has Blood on its Hands*, 1988

This leads us to look at a year later, which as seen in figure 4, a bloody hand represents the governments, that by ignoring the issue and remaining silent as in figure 3, they are responsible for anyone that has died from the AIDS epidemic. This poster was in response to “the New York City Commissioner of Health, Stephen Joseph, suddenly halved the number of estimated AIDS cases” (UC, 2023), by the government making this bad decision, it had

caused ‘ACT UP’ to react because it might cause a rise in cases due to it being ‘not as bad as people thought’.

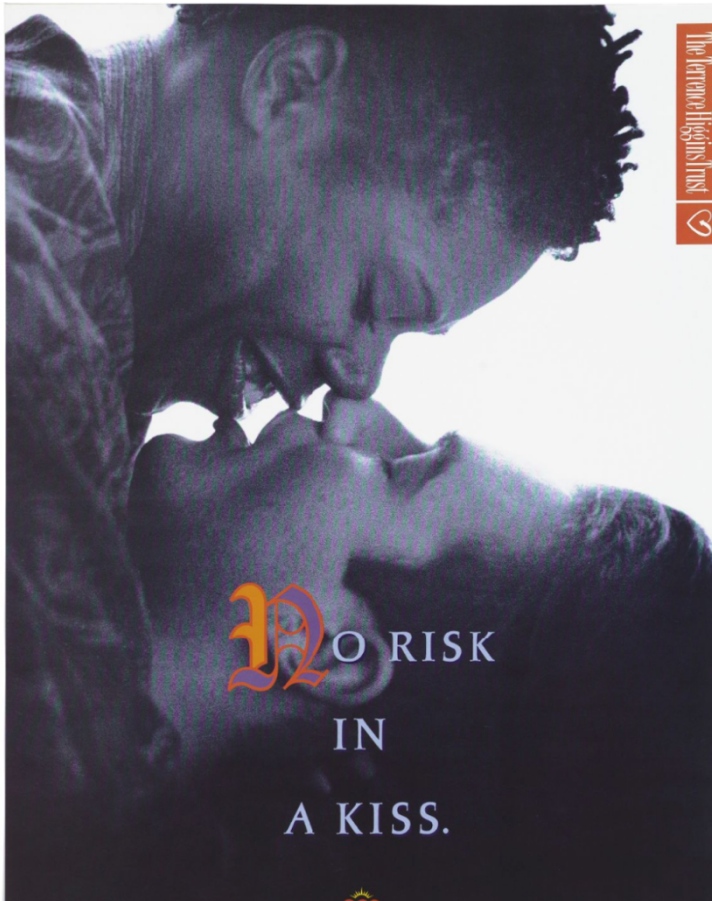


Fig 5. *A Couple touch noses as they are about to kiss,* Terrence Higgins Trust, Unknown.

The creator of figure 5 is by a charity called Terrence Higgins Trust, it was created by a “group of friends of Terrence Higgins who was one of the first fatalities of AIDS related illness in the UK. The charity aimed to reduce the spread of HIV and promote good sexual health.” (Bishopsgate Institution, 2023). This aim is in response to the stigma that was around AIDS, and instead of shaming the people that were enacting homosexuality, they were

encouraging safe ways to do it to limit the chances of contracting AIDS.

The campaign’s main goal is to “personalise and humanise AIDS in a very public way.” (THT, 2023). This is an important factor to consider when advertising medical information, and this was to contradict the ‘AIDS: Don’t Die of Ignorance’ campaign, where they used humiliation and fear as their promotion method.

In order to make information more accessible for people suffering with the disease, they established a helpline, counselling, legal advice, funding. This is a good direction that the

trust took where it is to give advice to people, but to help people suffering with the disease and what they can do to help themselves.

However, even though the charity was aiming for a positive outcome and to help battle the AIDS crisis, it was overshadowed due to the 'AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance' campaign's popularity and how widespread it developed. By researching this figure, it has told me that each campaign at the time was contemporarily accurate in the 1980s.

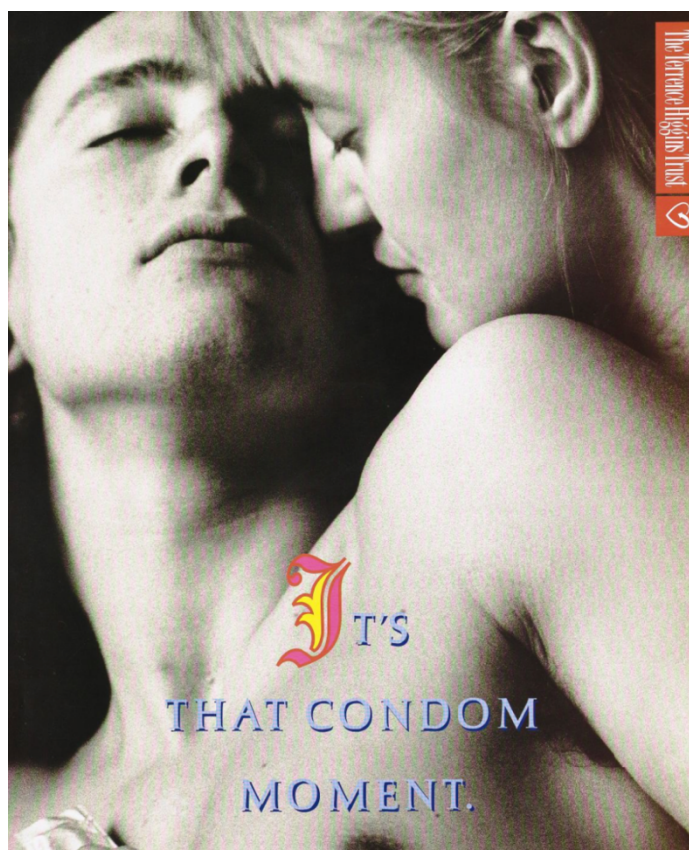


Fig 6. A naked couple embracing; man holds condom; an advert safe sex by the Terrence Higgins Trust. Terrence Higgins Trust, Unknown.

Following the point of the positive campaigns, I will explore the campaigns that are currently happening today, which one of them is the 'Terrence Higgins Trust'.

One of the newest campaigns that the 'Terrence Higgins Trust' has created is the 'Can't Pass It On', "it is about ending HIV Stigma and HIV transmissions" (THT, 2023). This is an important factor for the future of the AIDS crisis, this helps to ease people

who have been diagnosed with AIDS that they could prevent HIV transmissions. This way it helps to give people who are HIV positive confidence in themselves, and that they can continue with their daily lives.

After researching more into this campaign, it states that "the landmark PARTNER study in 2016, they look at 58,000 instances of sex without a condom where one partner was HIV positive, and one was negative.... And that the HIV positive partner was on effective treatment... there were zero cases of HIV transmission." (THT, 2023). This statement suggests that after considering the evidence, HIV positive people who are on treatment, can't pass on the virus, this improvement on the science experiments means that it has a

possibility of eliminating the fear that the previous stigma that the past campaigns had developed.

The other campaign that I found was the 'National AIDS Trust', one of its newest developments is the 'World AIDS Day 2023 animation', this was



Fig 7. *World AIDS Day 2023 Animation, Scott Coello, 2023*

designed by Scott Coello. The aim of the animation is to support people who are living with HIV, and it is a “celebration of community” (NAT, 2023). The full goal that they want is communities to support the ‘National AIDS Trust’ organisation to help fund new research.

After researching into the campaign and what they aim to do, I found out that “over 105,000 people live with HIV in the UK.... And they found out that 63% of the public do not remember seeing or hearing about HIV in the past 6 months.” (NAT, 2023). At this point of my research, after learning this, it is quite shocking that there has not been much advertisement on AIDS this year, it is important for people to be made aware of HIV, how to contract it, and the steps moving forward. Their aim for the future is to “end HIV transmission by 2030” (NAT, 2023) By this charity stating this goal, it gives people hope to an end of a long fight with AIDS, and the only way to do this is to continue to donate to the charity to help raise funds for new scientific research, so they will be able to update the medication that is required to stop the transmissions.

When comparing this campaign to the ones previously, it is more humane, and giving accurate and reliable information, without being blunt, or using imagery that is insensitive to the public. The difference between the past campaigns to the present is that “public health campaigns have the ability to spread worldwide now thanks to the internet.” (VA, 2023), this gives a great opportunity for new campaigns and ones that have been a part of the fight since the height of the epidemic to continue to raise awareness of the disease.

To conclude this essay, my main goal was to evaluate whether graphic design can save lives and I believe that I have done that. Even though it was a tough argument when weighing out between the positive and negative campaigns, I agree with the question, and will conclude that graphic design does save lives with the correct information and impactful elements.

This essay has provided me with a deeper insight to the importance of campaigns during the height of the epidemic, as well as in present times. I have learnt that visual culture has played an important role throughout the epidemic, and that providing the public with accurate, up to date information on the disease, as well as keeping a humane approach is at the utmost importance.

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