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Realising the Potential of a UK HIV/AIDS Graphic Ephemera Archive

www.hivgraphiccommunication.com

This article draws on my personal experience of attempting to address the temporality of HIV/AIDS health promotion through building an archive, making it accessible online and exploring potential uses for this resource.

Search for 'AIDS advertising UK' and the 1986 'Don't Die of Ignorance' government campaign will be the main result. Even those who were not around at the time will probably be familiar with the tombstone and iceberg imagery that has become a visual shorthand for AIDS prevention campaigns, regularly reproduced in journalistic articles and documentaries. However, this does not even represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of the extent of graphic output and communication strategies employed in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s, ignoring a significant amount of work created by diverse community groups, activists, local health authority projects and small regional charities. The preservation, documentation and accessibility of these projects dictates the representation and framing of the story of the AIDS epidemic and its communication.

In a survey published by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1990, Janet Foster identified twenty-eight organisations that held materials relevant to the social history of AIDS. Foster recognised the importance, as an archivist, of attempting to track records of the epidemic as it was happening. However, the main content of these archives was written documentation, with few visual samples of ephemera – leaflets, posters, condom packs, flyers etc.

“...the records most at risk are those of the voluntary sector organisations with a national role, for which there is no existing archival safety net.” (Foster 1993)

Foster's concerns regarding the preservation of materials are proving to be well founded. The majority of the organisations she listed have now closed, merged or restructured; their archives redistributed or destroyed.

My own collection began when I became involved with HIV/AIDS organisations in the early 1990s as a volunteer graphic designer. I was initially just looking for examples of good practice, but became increasingly interested in the visual language and alternative design approaches that I found. I extended my collecting by writing to over 170 UK AIDS service organisations in 1994, requesting sample materials. Retrospectively, my collecting methodology across a variety of sources fits with a

feminist approach to archiving – using ‘dirty’ methods of collecting; contaminated by the personal involvement of the collector and not aiming for completeness or authority. As a result, my archive now provides opportunities for comparing a range of both ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ voices: government and charities; national and local campaigns; general public and highly targeted audiences; activist volunteer and health professional approaches.

These materials track changing messages over time as the virus and its treatment evolved. For example, early on, deciding to take an HIV test had pros and cons that needed to be carefully weighed up – and even official government leaflets talked about “issues you might want to think about before deciding whether to take the test” (HEA 1988). Ominous question marks were a dominant visual theme. Post-antiretrovirals, the messages completely changed in tone to actively advocate testing as an HIV prevention strategy.

Establishing the normalisation of condoms, especially for gay men, was another important message. The condom as an object was a focus of affirmative action and a packaged product that organisations could use as a brand touchpoint – the more unusual and eye-catching the better.

Comparing ‘official’ government channels with locally produced material highlights a marked difference in the use of language – both visual and written. The work done by grass roots charities for specific audiences such as ethnic minorities, drug users, gay men or HIV positive women, are all good examples of a ‘by and for’ approach. On the front of their leaflets, Positively Women stated “...written for women by the experts – women”. GMFA (the gay men’s health charity) used the description, “By gay men, for gay men” as a clear point of difference when they formed as a breakaway organisation from Terrence Higgins Trust in 1992. Making use of volunteers and audience insiders, these charities were well placed to test and develop appropriate tones of voice for discussing sexual behaviour and lifestyles. This use of the visual and verbal vernacular of target groups was often innovative and sometimes controversial in terms of health promotion, but made their interventions more credible and built trust with audiences.

As a designer, my practice is about clear communication – I want my research to be practical and helpful. Five years ago, the time felt right to revisit the collection – enough time had passed and there seemed to be new interest in HIV/AIDS as a cultural (and now historical) subject. Creating an online resource made sense as a way of giving the collection structure and purpose. I therefore focused my website categorisation around two key criteria – subject matter (what were the messages?) and audiences (who was receiving them?).

After uploading over 1,300 images, I need to work out a strategy for the archive. I am keen that it has practical and applied uses, playing to my strengths as a designer and educator and inspired by the philosophy of the Interference Archive, New York: “We consider the use of our collection to be a way of preserving and honouring histories and material culture that is often marginalised in mainstream institutions.”

(Interference Archive 2020)

I am interested in finding new ways of engaging different audiences and have begun testing uses for the archive as a resource for education, research and the design of future campaigns. When GMFA was developing a chemsex campaign in conjunction with volunteers, making past communications about drug use for gay men available was a useful discussion point. Having a range of visual examples to react to helps non-designers articulate their ideas more clearly and accelerate the idea generation process. Another way of working with the collection has been to consider how items might be organised visually to make connections and developments more apparent e.g. designing timelines as large format posters for display. By discussing materials with diverse interest groups, such as researchers, health professionals, designers, academics, archivists and activists, different stories and interpretations are emerging from the ephemera. [see Archive Research Diagram.pdf]

There are on-going challenges for the archive and the website. The closure and merger of organisations complicate obtaining copyright permission. The website is self-funded and therefore limited in its functionality and ability to show items in their entirety. I also need to consider where the physical archive should finally end up. When I have finished working with the material I would want, in some small way, to fulfil Janet Foster's vision for a comprehensive HIV/AIDS archive. This project came about through identifying a need to locate and archive examples of design practice across *all* communities that were affected by HIV/AIDS in the UK, in order to examine what can be learned from their unique responses to the epidemic.

HIV activism has seen a new resurgence in recent years and there are new issues to tackle, new media to use and no place for complacency. My intention remains to preserve examples from the past in order to be able to plan for the future. AIDS won't be the last epidemic to disproportionately affect minority communities, stigmatise those affected or involve having to talk about difficult subjects such as sex, drugs and death. Being able to examine the visual language and designed content of HIV/AIDS graphic ephemera is a great way to start having those conversations with new audiences.

References

- Health Education Authority. 1988. "AIDS: The Test" (leaflet).
- Foster, Janet. 1993. "Appendix, AIDS: The Archive Potential" in *AIDS and Contemporary History* edited by Virginia Berridge and Philip Strong. Cambridge University Press.
- Interference Archive. "Our Mission". Accessed 24th February 2020.
<https://interferencearchive.org/our-mission/>

Image Captions

1. 'Testing Issues', Terrence Higgins Trust. Booklet, 1993.
2. 'Get Tested!', National AIDS Trust (with GMFA & BASHH). Leaflet, 2010.
3. Assorted condom packaging from the archive. Photo: Siân Cook.
4. 'African Women's Health Issues', Positively Women. Booklet: Cover illustration;

Elena Parson. Original front cover design; Jane Shepherd. Design & text illustrations; Néna Carney Design. 1994.

5. 'Women Like Us', Positively Women. Poster: Photo: Suzanne Roden. circa 1990-95.

6. 6 Postcard Set, Norwich Gay Men's Health Project. Design: Ike Rust. 1994.

7. Personal Research Visualisation: Siân Cook. 2020.

Biography

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