

# Televsual Emotional Pedagogy: AIDS, Affect, and Activism on Vito Russo's *Our Time*

Television &amp; New Media

1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/1527476418813440

[journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn)

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## Abstract

Starting in New York City in the 1970s, gay men and lesbians created public access television programs to shine a spotlight on their experiences, communities, concerns, and businesses. This article asks, “How did public access programming provide an emerging televsual forum for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people to circulate community affects, experiences, and activism?” Looking to the “AIDS” episode of the 1983 cable access series *Our Time*, this article traces emerging affective responses to the AIDS epidemic, fear and anger in particular, present in the episode. This article argues that the content and aesthetics of the episode produce a televsual emotional pedagogy about AIDS, making sense of the rising panic to channel these feelings toward collective action. While little research has explored gay and lesbian public access programming, this article reveals that it provides a significant contribution to television history and to mediated archives of feelings in response to AIDS.

## Keywords

cable television, queer, advocacy, history, AIDS, affect

On March 3, 1983, *Our Time*, an LGBTQ-focused public access show produced by WNYC-TV and Manhattan Cable, aired an episode focused on the burgeoning HIV/AIDS crisis. Gay activist and co-host Vito Russo opens the show; looking directly into the camera, he recites the following statement: “Good evening. The gay community is facing a terrifying health problem right now.” With the aid of his notes, Russo offers

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up-to-the-minute data about the number of AIDS-related deaths around the country and in New York City. Russo looks to his left and the camera cuts to his co-host, lesbian writer Marcia Pally, who proceeds to explain that AIDS is a dangerous epidemic targeting the immune systems of its patients, leaving them vulnerable to a variety of infections. The camera then cuts back to Russo as he says, “Tonight we’re gonna be taking a look at how the gay community is coping with the most serious crisis in its history.”

This episode marks a significant moment in television history: *Our Time* was likely the first television series created by and for LGBTQ people to address the AIDS epidemic. I look to *Our Time* to investigate the role of LGBTQ public access programming in circulating emerging community affects and experiences of the AIDS crisis. In the opening of this episode, Russo and Pally soberly characterize AIDS as a deadly and mysterious disease spreading rapidly among gay men nationwide. The use of direct address in the first minutes of the episode establishes a sense of urgency around the epidemic, creating what I am calling a *televisual emotional pedagogy* about AIDS. I deploy the term *televisual emotional pedagogy* to characterize the process through which televisual aesthetics clarify for the audience how to feel about a given topic. On *Our Time*, televisual aesthetics implicitly instruct the audience on what and how to feel about AIDS. *Our Time* encourages feelings of urgency, fear, and anger via its aesthetics, engendering new modes of encountering the epidemic for its audience members.

*Our Time* was one among a number of cable access programs made by and for LGBTQ people created during this time period: starting in the 1970s, gay men and lesbians began to produce public access programming to shine a spotlight on their experiences, communities, concerns, and businesses.<sup>1</sup> Studies of LGBTQ television history typically recount the relative dearth of representation in broadcast network programming from the 1950s to 1980s, noting the way in which LGBTQ people were depicted as social problems or via stereotype and innuendo when mentioned at all. A close look at the history of cable access programming helps reveal the ways in which “television has always been queer” (Villarejo 2014, 3). A site for formal experimentation, local politics, and activist content, public access television was designed to provide a forum for alternative media that could reach communities underserved by the broadcast networks.

In the 1960s, a community television movement emerged among activists who imagined that television and video technologies could offer a democratized form of local and mass communication (Freedman 2000). In response to demands for more local control of cable from progressive political groups as well as industry leaders and professional groups, in the early 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission issued a series of orders requiring cable television systems to offer access channels for educational, government, and public information purposes (Streeter 1997). Public access channels were meant to shift power away from the cable operator and toward the general public: cable companies made available air-time as well as equipment for individuals and community groups to use for their own programming. Activists and artists hoped public access could fulfill what Charlotte Howell (2017, 4) calls “the dream of localism,” or the desire for televisual media to serve underrepresented communities.

While cable access would eventually become integrated into the corporate cable system in the 1990s, the utopian hope that cable could provide “democratic” television was still alive in access programming in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Media activists took advantage of this newfound ability to produce alternative programming to amplify local community issues. Vito Russo was one such activist. His advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ community spanned the Gay Liberation era of the 1960s and 1970s through the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. In the 1970s, Russo joined the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), a group known for its television activism: GAA “zapped” corporate media companies with targeted protests designed to influence television coverage of gay and lesbian issues (Doyle 2016, 35). A decade later, Russo was a founding member of GLAAD, the prominent LGBTQ media advocacy nonprofit, as well as ACT UP, the grassroots organization famous for its use of civil disobedience, video art, and direct action to end the AIDS crisis. Russo continued his activism until his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1990. He is perhaps most famous for publishing *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* in 1981, an encyclopedic study documenting representations of homosexuality in film. While *The Celluloid Closet* has become a foundational text of queer media studies, Russo’s participation as co-host and producer of the LGBTQ television program *Our Time* has yet to be considered as a prominent aspect of his legacy.

*Our Time* spanned thirteen episodes and aired on Manhattan Cable’s Channel L on Sunday and Tuesday nights in 1983. Designed as a magazine-format program, *Our Time*’s segments covered a variety of topics specific to New York gay and lesbian community culture, including local politics and entertainment news as well as broader subject areas like the HIV/AIDS epidemic, activist history, gay literature, coming out, drag, transphobia, alcoholism, and racism. *Our Time*’s segments were structured in a range of formats—pre-recorded reports, people-on-the-street interviews in Manhattan, comedic and artistic performances, on-set interviews, and announcements for local gay and lesbian events and meetings—interspersed with footage of the co-hosts introducing the material and appearing in the segments themselves. On air, guests included celebrities, activists, and scholars, such as Harvey Fierstein, Lily Tomlin, Larry Kramer, Harry Hay, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Smith. The diversity of content on *Our Time* sets it apart from earlier gay cable access shows; whereas shows like *Emerald City* (1978–1979) focused on the downtown club and party scene, *Our Time* highlighted the voices of those marginalized within New York’s queer community spaces.

Russo and his collaborators created a show that focused on LGBTQ politics and cultural life from a variety of perspectives. I am particularly interested in *Our Time*’s coverage of queer sexual health and wellness, perhaps the most urgent LGBTQ issue of the time period. I investigate how *Our Time*’s “AIDS” episode addresses the early years of the AIDS epidemic, arguing that the show produces a televisual emotional pedagogy about AIDS via its textual aesthetics: its direct address segments, on-set interviews, and people-on-the-street interviews are infused with feelings of panic, anger, and fear that perform a didactic function. My formulation builds on Deborah Gould’s concept of “emotional pedagogy,” which describes how social movements make sense of affective states to channel them toward activist work. She notes that

“Social movement contexts provide a language for people’s affective states as well as a pedagogy of sorts regarding what and how to feel and what to do in light of those feelings” (Gould 2009, 28). The pedagogy of feeling performed in this *Our Time* episode makes sense of the rising panic about the AIDS crisis to channel these feelings toward collective action.

This article follows recent work attuned to the way in which affect, feeling, and emotion circulate through media texts. Drawing from Raymond Williams’s (1961) conception of “structures of feeling,” feminist and queer affect studies investigate the way in which feeling, experience, and emotion shape and reflect our social worlds. As Ann Cvetkovich (2002, 110) writes, “Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive.” Cvetkovich (2003, 7) looks for this radical archive of emotion through the study of “archives of feeling,” in which she situates “cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.” Cvetkovich claims that the study of archives of feeling is particularly important to the study of minoritarian histories: personal memories, ephemera, and experimental media provide accounts of LGBTQ life that are often absented in traditional archives.

What might a radical archive of emotion look like on television? In her study of Black Power era television programming, Gayle Wald (2015, 6) considers *Soul!* (1968–1972), a public television show that aired on WNET, as a televisual archive of structures of feeling “expressive both of a particular time and place and yet-to-be-realized formations.” Wald discusses the feel of the Black Power era as archived in *Soul!* looking to the show’s aesthetics, format, and programming to establish the way in which it foregrounded black cultural production and performance. Building on Wald’s work, I attend to the textual aesthetics and content of LGBTQ public access television to trace emerging queer affects. I position cable access programming as a mediated archive that offers insight into the structures of feelings circulating in queer communities in the 1980s. While Wald (2015, 7) finds utopian possibilities in *Soul!’s* project—it “gestured toward a dreamed-of future” by imagining a televisual space that would make central black politics and culture—*Our Time* is constrained by the immediate crisis of its present, particularly in the “AIDS” episode. Rather than utopian futurity, *Our Time* circulates feelings of urgency, fear, and anger during a moment in which death and disease began to overwhelm gay and lesbian communities.

## Legitimizing Urgency via the Direct Address Mode

Through its coverage of urgent LGBTQ issues, *Our Time* provided a counterpublic space for the recognition of queer feelings on television. This is apparent during first minutes of the “AIDS” episode. In the opening segment, co-hosts Russo and Pally borrow from the television nightly news format to relay dense information to their audience via direct address. Throughout television history, news broadcasters have employed the direct address speaking position to imbue their speech with a sense of

legitimacy. In this format, an anchor addresses the camera while reading a prepared text “as if it were the spontaneous utterance of a speaker in conversation” (Hallas 2009, 80). Roger Hallas (2009, 80) argues that direct address is common within television news reporting in part because it “produces a sense of the broadcast’s liveness and an impression of the anchor’s discursive authority.” On *Our Time*, Russo and Pally’s authoritative position as co-hosts grants the pair the power to construct a pedagogy of feeling about AIDS: Russo and Pally relate facts and statistics about AIDS with a sense of urgency and sobriety, conveying the growing fear circulating through gay communities during the beginning of the AIDS crisis.

Mainstream news media outlets were reluctant to report on the epidemic in the early 1980s. In July of 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published the first report about the virus, a small piece in its weekly digest alerting health officials to a spate of opportunistic infections affecting gay men (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2018). Scientists did not isolate the virus that causes AIDS, what we now call HIV, until 1984; at the time this episode aired, modes of transmission via blood and sexual contact were suspected but not yet confirmed (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2018). Broadcast television news coverage in this time period largely increased hysteria and misinformation about AIDS—it was only celebrity Rock Hudson’s death in 1985 that granted the AIDS epidemic “legitimacy as a newsworthy issue” (Hallas 2009, 83). Consequently, lesbian and gay journalists and activists made use of the alternative press to spread awareness of their concerns about AIDS. The week after this *Our Time* episode aired, Larry Kramer published his now-classic polemic “1,112 and Counting” in the gay newspaper *The New York Native*, in which he condemned journalists, politicians, and doctors for not acting swiftly in the face of mounting death rates (Ocamb 2011). Gay and lesbian activists realized that, as Larry Gross (1991, 40) argues, “The most effective form of resistance to the hegemonic force of dominant media is to speak for oneself.” This *Our Time* episode provides a compelling example of a moment in which gay and lesbian individuals “spoke” for themselves, spreading any known information about AIDS to other LGBTQ people in New York via cable television.

A close look at the aesthetics of the opening segment of this episode provides an example of the way in which *Our Time* created content by and for gay and lesbian New Yorkers by appropriating the format of broadcast television news. As the episode opens, the camera steadily focuses on the solemn faces of Russo and Pally, who are each seated in front of a simple blue set piece. The co-hosts address the camera, reading their material—statistics, medical research, death counts, and other scientific data about the spread of AIDS—off of pre-written cards. Similarly to a nightly news broadcast, the direct address mode on *Our Time* facilitates the simple and rapid communication of information to the audience. In addition to providing factual information, this opening segment simultaneously performs an affective function. The static camera focuses the attention of the segment on the co-hosts’ solemn facial expressions and the grave information they impart to the audience, conveying a sense of urgency about the epidemic. This segment constructs a televisual mode of emotional pedagogy about

AIDS: the aesthetics of the segment characterize AIDS as a mounting crisis, implicitly instructing viewers to fear its deadly effects.

In borrowing the direct address format from nightly news broadcasters, *Our Time* grants authority to marginalized individuals in the studio, challenging the structures of power typically seen in commercial news. Examining broadcast news media, Hallas (2009, 81) associates the direct address position with an uneven “structure of power” that affords authority to the newscaster over “the subjects of news.” Hallas (2009, 81) writes that the “subjects of news” are typically disempowered because their speech is mediated through the discursive elements of the newsroom, including the studio, the news correspondents, and the *mise-en-scène* of the newsroom. While this may be the case in mainstream news programming that stigmatizes its subjects, direct address as seen in *Our Time* grants power to those same individuals. The direct address mode is self-reflexive on *Our Time*: it allows gay men and lesbians to respond to their exclusion from the mainstream news media in a speaking position from which they were traditionally excluded. Eric Freedman (2000, 187) argues that the radical potential of early public access programs lay in their self-referentiality; community-based access programs, especially those made by and for gay and lesbian communities, enabled “people to speak about the ability to speak.” In this episode, the direct address mode performs this self-reflexive function by allowing gay men and lesbians access to an authoritative speaking position through which they can articulate their marginalization. As the hosts of the show, Russo and Pally are visually and discursively constructed as televisual experts, able to rebut the claims of mainstream media and express their commitment to sharing accurate information about the AIDS crisis.

The co-hosts align themselves with the imagined queer community of their audience in this opening segment. Russo and Pally refer to AIDS as a “terrifying health problem” affecting “the gay community.” By referring to “the gay community” outside the confines of the set and including themselves within it, Russo and Pally perform what Hallas (2009, 80) calls “pseudointimacy,” simulating a personal relationship between themselves and their audience. This assumed affective relationship between host and audience gestures toward the way in which *Our Time* strived to create a community space on television for gay and lesbian New Yorkers. Writing on SiriusXM’s LGBTQ-focused radio network OutQ, Alfred Martin (2017, 3) argues that OutQ created a national “queer listening public” by discursively centering queer community news, issues, and current events in content designed for queer listeners. Because OutQ was broadcast nationally via satellite radio, Martin (2017, 3) argues that it “carved out a queer space that attempted to make queerness quotidian” within the confines of the commercial radio industry. *Our Time* similarly catered to local LGBTQ television audiences underserved by broadcast networks; it crafted what I would call a queer counterpublic space on cable television. The use of “counterpublic” rather than “public” evokes Nancy Fraser’s (1990, 67) definition of subaltern counterpublics: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” *Our Time* can be categorized as a queer counterpublic television program because it aired on the alternative “parallel

discursive arena” of noncommercial television and foregrounded LGBTQ issues, concerns, and current events.

From their relative position of power as hosts of this show, Russo and Pally serve as models for how queer counterpublic programming could respond to the AIDS crisis. Martin (2017, 3) suggests that a mediated queer public “recognizes and fosters a space for queer feeling(s) and makes such feelings resonate as both national and local feelings.” The co-hosts’ direct address monologues foster a queer counterpublic space for the exploration of feelings about AIDS, emphasizing its deadly potential by conveying a sense of urgency and alarm when discussing the epidemic’s effect on gay and lesbian communities. The focus on fear as an affective mode in addressing the epidemic paves the way for *Our Time* to stage a call to action, or what I refer to as a call to affect, in the following segment.

### **A Call to Affect: A Pedagogy of Anger in on-Set Interviews with Activists**

Following this opening segment, Russo conducts a lengthy interview with AIDS activist luminaries Larry Kramer and Virginia Apuzzo. By mid-1983, Kramer, co-founder of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), and Apuzzo, Executive Director of the National Gay Task Force, were quickly becoming two of the most outspoken AIDS activists in the country. Kramer took to the gay press to indict the media and government for ignoring the AIDS crisis; Apuzzo helped organize candlelight vigils and protests in Washington D.C., condemning the federal government for its negligence of people with AIDS (Gould 2009). Gould (2009, 91) credits Apuzzo and Kramer with “shift[ing] the political horizon in lesbian and gay communities” toward the confrontational activism that would emerge later in the mid-1980s through organizations such as ACT UP. While in 1983, these individuals were community activists with varying degrees of renown, Kramer in particular is now known as a (controversial) hero of the AIDS activist movement, credited in part with jumpstarting radical organizing on behalf of people with AIDS. This early interview on *Our Time* showcases these two influential activists, providing an opportunity for them to stage a call for collective queer anger. The rhetoric of Kramer, Apuzzo, and Russo as well as the sparse *mise-en-scène* of the set and interview format of the segment construct a televisual pedagogy of anger as a response to AIDS.

Russo interviews Kramer and Apuzzo together in a twelve-minute segment in the beginning half of the episode. Throughout the interview, Kramer and Apuzzo repeatedly rhetorically frame AIDS as a disastrous crisis producing little response from the government, medical institutions, and media. Russo introduces Kramer and Apuzzo and directs the first question to his interviewees: “I’d like to ask them first how the community is beginning to cope with this particular epidemic at this time and how rough it’s been to organize people behind this issue and get people out there fighting against this disease. What’s going on right now, and how tough has it been for you to organize around it?” Kramer answers first: “How we’re coping and how we should be coping? Who knows, it’s just a terrible, terrible, terrible situation. Very little has been

done to help us on any level, city level, federal level, state level seems to be getting a little better, and the community level as well.”

After Russo and Kramer discuss the extent to which government officials have avoided granting resources to people with AIDS, Russo asks Apuzzo to discuss the decision by the Hemophilia Foundation to discourage gay people from giving blood. Apuzzo responds,

I think that the problem is not unlike what Larry is explaining. Look at the vulnerable position the gay community is in. On one hand, we're victims of an unidentified epidemic. The necessity to research is clear to anyone. There's no question we need the research money. The gay community has been talking about this for two years, and two years later there is still foot dragging in terms of research. There is speculation that the issue of blood may provide the transmissive agent. If that's the case, doesn't it make sense to one, test the blood, and two, escalate that imperative with regard to research? Neither of those two things are being done. What's being done is that we're blaming the victim.

As Apuzzo discusses the complicated relationship between hemophiliacs and gay communities, she situates it in the context of victimization. Both gay men and hemophiliacs are victims of an unidentified disease, and yet Apuzzo affirms it is gay men who are blamed for the spread of AIDS. This framing helps Apuzzo claim that gay people are an oppressed group, doubly victimized as they are blamed for the spread of the disease that is killing them. Apuzzo's use of the rhetorical question (“Doesn't it make sense . . .?”) emphasizes her point: instead of blaming the victim, the Hemophilia Foundation should allocate more funding toward research and testing. Kramer seems to agree with Apuzzo; he adds, “If this epidemic is going to hit more and more straight people, they're screwing themselves by not doing the research now. As in hepatitis, we're doing everybody's suffering for them.” Kramer and Apuzzo repeatedly reinforce the stigmatization of gay people and people with AIDS, who desperately need help that the government refuses to give. Toward the end of the interview, Kramer speaks with increased intensity: “We have never been in such a terribly threatening position in the whole history of being gay. In the whole history of homosexuality. This is life or death. We are dying. We are going to have to unite. We are going to have to be angry. We are going to have to be perceived as being a threat . . . It is up to us, right now.”

I quote this interview at length to demonstrate the rhetorical force of the activists on screen in this episode. This is not a calm and measured discussion about the relationship between the spread of AIDS, hemophilia, blood donations, institutional responses, and gay community life. Apuzzo and Kramer take this interview as an opportunity to stage a call to action. They both passionately explain the state of devastation caused by AIDS and the deeply disappointing lack of institutional response. Kramer in particular addresses the gay and lesbian community, speaking from a “we” position to include himself within the audience of the show. Short, declarative sentences, such as “We are dying,” help Kramer to assert the gravity of the situation. Kramer repeatedly affirms the desperate need for gay and lesbian community action around AIDS.



Russo, visibly affected by Kramer's impromptu speech, wraps up the interview: "Well, I wanna thank you both. I don't blame you for being angry and I'd like to get a lot of people in this community angry. The rest of this show may help you to get angry, because we're gonna be telling you some things that may scare the shit out of you. And that's exactly what we're trying to do, because you need to be scared in order to get angry." This is a significant moment in the episode and in the series, in which Russo addresses the viewer and makes transparent his authorial intent: he asserts that he wants to activate gay and lesbian people around AIDS. While this is a mediated conversation—tensions are heightened by reactions shots, glances between Russo and the interviewees, and Kramer and Apuzzo's performative gestures—it is significant that Russo frames the conversation as a call to fear, anger, and community action. Speaking to his viewer once again in the direct address mode, Russo reveals his positionality. Russo is not a neutral or removed television host, but someone it seems who is scared and angry himself. While Russo and Pally use direct address throughout the episode, this is the only moment in which he makes a specific call to action, or what I propose functions here as a call to affect. After establishing a climate of fear in the opening segment of the episode, this interview stresses the need for collective anger in response to AIDS.

This interview provides contemporary viewers with a televisual archive of queer frustration and anger in response to the AIDS epidemic. This may be the first televised debate of its kind about the impact of AIDS on the gay and lesbian community. There were only a handful of groups organizing around AIDS at this time and few opportunities for activists to appear on news media programs. In the absence of commercial media discourse, *Our Time* served as one outlet for the expression of feelings about AIDS. While Kramer and Apuzzo's repeated calls to action would not inspire mass mobilization until the mid-1980s, the existence of this discussion on television points to the percolating fear and anger among gay and lesbian people before the era of militant organizing against AIDS. A historically significant discussion, this episode showcases two prophets of the epidemic using public access as a forum through which to encourage emerging affective modes of experiencing the AIDS crisis.

The bare-bones set and basic video equipment used in this episode enhance the pedagogy of anger presented by Russo and his interviewees: the *mise-en-scène* gives *Our Time* a "grassroots" feel that increases its sense of fidelity to queer community activism. The set for this interview is sparse. Russo, Apuzzo, and Kramer sit on beige chairs arranged in a half-circle on top of a red carpet and in front of an off-white wall. The camera cuts between static head shots of each speaker, pulling away to show the group when Russo asks them a question. No graphics, props, or other footage appear during this interview; the focus is on this conversation alone. These aesthetic choices—simple *mise-en-scène* filmed with basic camerawork—are common to early public access programs created on a meager budget. Cable access programming has historically been produced with minimal financial backing; in this way, it differs from public television associated with PBS, which has relied on large grants from foundations and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Lynn Spigel (2017, 52) writes that the low-budget aesthetics of early access shows gave them "an aura of authenticity,

spontaneity, and intimacy.” For *Our Time*, its simple set design and camerawork grants the show an aura of sincerity.

It is worth noting that there was no major corporation or foundation financially backing *Our Time*. According to WNYC-TV director John Beck, *Our Time* was produced on a “shoestring” budget (Wallace 1983). WNYC-TV and Manhattan Cable offered to subsidize only the first season of *Our Time*, and the team could not raise enough funds from individual donors to produce another season (Wallace 1983). *Our Time’s* cancellation reveals the limits of queer programming in the early 1980s. Despite Manhattan Cable’s willingness to air such programming, it is likely that donors were reluctant to fund television series made by and for gay and lesbian people. When the journalists and activists creating the shows could no longer afford to volunteer their time or to work for little pay, the production of such programming became unsustainable.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, *Our Time’s* lack of financial resources, the show’s sparse set foregrounds the conversation between Russo, Apuzzo, and Kramer by lending a sense of earnestness to its messages of advocacy. Unlike some of its contemporary access programs, which employed experimental aesthetics to challenge the status of television as a communications medium and commercial institution, *Our Time’s* use of television conventions like the on-set interview facilitated direct communication to a local community. Alternative media often employ traditional narrative conventions “to do the political work of entering new opinions, new selves, or newly understood selves into the public discourse” (Juhasz 1995, 22). Using conventional televisual codes and a simple *mise-en-scène* allowed *Our Time* to stage a powerful call for collective queer anger. While *Our Time* may have lacked a substantial budget, it made use of the resources at hand—the basic interview format and the static camera talking head shot—to set the focus of this conversation on the content of the interview. These aesthetic choices emphasize Russo, Kramer, and Apuzzo’s call for a communal affect, creating a televisual emotional pedagogy oriented toward anger in response to AIDS.

## **A Crisis of Feeling: Archiving Queer Communal Affects in People-on-the-Street Interviews**

Following the interview with Kramer and Apuzzo, *Our Time* airs interviews with five gay men of various ages and racial backgrounds in a people-on-the-street segment. Every episode of *Our Time* intercuts such segments into the show on topics related to the theme of the episode. In the “AIDS” episode, this segment highlights percolating feelings of shame, fatalism, and fear among gay community members in New York, portraying the AIDS crisis in terms of its effect on communal attitudes about sexual health and promiscuity. These interviews produce an archive of feelings about AIDS that demonstrates the broad reach of the crisis throughout New York’s gay communities. Via sequence and editing, the people-on-the-street interviews build on the pedagogies of fear and anger in the episode by implicitly critiquing intracommunal fatalism and encouraging righteous anger in its place.

People-on-the-street segments offer a glimpse into the complex range of affective experiences of gay New Yorkers in the early period of the AIDS epidemic. Russo asks men on the street if they have changed their sexual lifestyle practices in response to news about the spread of the disease. Gay sexual practices came under harsh scrutiny by the mainstream media in the early years of the epidemic; newscasters blamed the “gay lifestyle” for the rapid spread of the disease among gay and bisexual men, reinforcing homophobic rhetoric that linked homosexuality to promiscuity and disease. This sparked an intra-communal debate about sexual health within gay communities: some wondered whether the hard-earned sexual freedoms of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s might in fact be making them sick, and others refused to compromise these freedoms. *Our Time’s* interviews about this subject, the majority of which are shared during an extended sequence in the middle of the episode, reflect a range of responses to this set of debates. Here is a sample of the responses:

- “I know one person who is still as active as possible, and among my circle of friends, we now call him The Carrier.”
- “I have a friend who has the AIDS disease and I would say that I have seen a lot of change . . . I know people that no longer go to the baths because they’re afraid of multiple contacts. So I’m surprised, to tell you the truth, and I think there’s a problem with this . . . there seems to be a lot of puritanism and self-hate and there’s a real backlash.”
- “I don’t think it’s going to change many people as far as their sexual activity. You know, it’s like smoking cigarettes. People who smoke cigarettes, you know, they’ve been told for years that its gonna cause cancer. They say, well that’s fine, if I get cancer I get cancer. I think it’s the same thing about sexual activity. I don’t think they’re gonna change much.”
- “My friend’s friend, he had two friends who got the gay disease. They all got the gay cancer. They got so upset about it. In fact, me and all my friends, we don’t go to either [the] bathhouse or bar as often as we did before.”

This selection of responses identifies a range of reactions to the presence of AIDS in the local community. Some men describe their own and/or their friends’ shifting tendencies toward monogamy and decisions to avoid the bathhouses; others express a lack of concern for the ways in which AIDS may be spreading through sexual networks. A few imagine AIDS as analogous to other deadly diseases or accidents; this fatalistic attitude suggests illness may be unavoidable, so why attempt to prevent it? Others mention the rise of “puritanism” and “backlash” against sexual liberation, which seems to be hurting the bottom line of local gay businesses. While the men interviewed in *Our Time* are certainly not a fully representative sample of gay New Yorkers, these interviews do suggest the existence of a variety of affects and experiences related to the AIDS epidemic in 1983.

Not much has been written about the mediated experiences of LGBTQ people in the early years of the AIDS crisis. While there is a robust body of literature exploring the psychological impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, scholars who write about AIDS

media produced by LGBTQ people tend to write about work created after the emergence of ACT UP in 1987 (Hallas 2009; Hilderbrand 2006; Juhasz 1995; Robé 2017). Gould's work provides insight into an earlier time period: focusing on newspapers like *The New York Native* and *The Advocate*, she extensively discusses responses to the epidemic in the gay press between 1981 and 1985, writing that discussions of AIDS in the early 1980s "were saturated with ambivalent language" as they oscillated between a sense of communal pride in the rapid response service provision undertaken by gay communities alongside a perpetual sense of shame about the relationship between gay sexual practices and the spread of the disease (Gould 2009, 62). This shame-related discourse echoes throughout *Our Time's* interviewees: the men interviewed in this episode rarely reflect on their own sex lives, instead referring to the actions of friends or "people" in general, perhaps in an effort to distance themselves from the stigma associated with promiscuity. While this lens is useful, what might account for the various responses present in this episode beyond the existing literature on pride, ambivalence, and shame?

Scholars may be able to look to *Our Time* and similar shows as mediated archives that offer clues to understanding the broader range of queer affective responses to the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. Writing about experimental AIDS documentaries, Cvetkovich (2003, 244) argues that these films "use the power of visual media to put the archive on display," often incorporating a wide range of visual materials to record the experience of living through the AIDS crisis. Cable access programs like *Our Time* similarly use the aesthetics of televisual media to "put the archive on display": in this case, people-on-the-street interviews offer glimpses into an archive of feelings that records a range of reactions to the spread of AIDS. Fear and anxiety are present in these interviews, alongside a strikingly fatalistic attitude about the inevitability of death and disease. What might explain these differing experiences? It is important to underscore the widespread lack of information about AIDS available at the time, as well as the fact that no one could have known how devastating the epidemic would become. While more than sixteen thousand people would be diagnosed with AIDS by the end of 1985, the 1,000 or so people diagnosed by 1983 might not have caused alarm in gay communities on a comparable scale (Rensberger 1986). Racial difference may be a crucial site of exploration in this segment as well. While *Our Time* discursively centers whiteness, in particular, by featuring a white gay man and lesbian as the hosts of the show, its move in this segment to include interviews with men of color raises a number of questions. How might the experiences of black, Asian, and Latinx men in this time period have differed from their white peers? More specifically, how might racism in the medical and political institutions, interpersonal racism in gay community spaces, and class- and race-based segregation in New York have affected the experiences of gay men of color at this time? The stories of white men have come to dominate media depictions of the early AIDS crisis, men like Vito Russo, Larry Kramer, and Michael Callen, all of whom are featured in this episode. This episode does not provide much in the way of answers to questions about racial difference outside of the presence of men of color on screen. Still, these interviews available in *Our Time* call for a renewed exploration into the relationship between race, sexuality, and

communal affects during this time period. While this show may privilege particular perspectives, *Our Time* can provide glimpses into “the unusual emotional archive” of LGBTQ history preserved in cable across programming (Cvetkovich 2003, 244).

Although a variety of feelings are present in this emotional archive, the people-on-the-street interviews emphasize the pedagogies of fear and anger proposed by the direct address opening segment and the on-set interview. The editing of people-on-the-street segments in montage sequences stages each interview as an addition to or an alternative response to conversation around the theme of the episode. While the people-on-the-street interviews are presented without comment from the *Our Time* hosts, the editing of the interview sequence in this episode implicitly critiques the fatalistic attitude demonstrated by some of the interviewees. The majority of these interviews air during the middle of the episode, but the episode ends with a standalone interview of a man who says, “Everyone I know is scared shitless.” *Our Time*’s framing is evident here. The team incorporates a diversity of reactions to the spread of AIDS throughout the episode yet ends the episode with an interview that expresses fear as a prevailing structure of feeling of the time period. This interview recalls Russo’s own admission earlier in the episode that the show “may scare the shit out of you” because “you need to be scared in order to get angry.”

The viewer is left with the phrase “scared shitless” as the episode transitions to its credit sequence. The people-on-the-street interviews, the final one in particular, urge the audience to recognize the unfolding AIDS epidemic as a crisis. Not only a crisis of sexual and physical health, it is a crisis of feeling: *Our Time* conveys that the AIDS crisis has transformed multiplicitous queer communal affects into structures of feeling dominated by fear, paranoia, and stigma. The editing of the people-on-the-street interviews, combined with the earlier on-set interviews and direct address talking head segments, indirectly critiques the defeatism of some community members. Implying that LGBTQ New Yorkers must shift their perspectives—from defeatism toward the instrumentalization of fear as agency—the episode encourages its audience to turn varied percolating affects into a collective response oriented toward activism to confront the AIDS crisis.

## Conclusion

The study of 1980s public access programming adds new archives of emotion, affect, and feeling into television history. While little research has focused on the emergence of this programming, a close look at local, noncommercial television reveals that LGBTQ content proliferated on cable access stations from the 1980s onward: following *Our Time*’s short run on Manhattan Cable, programs made by and for LGBTQ individuals in New York grew in number, including shows like *Gay Morning America* (1983–1985), *Living with AIDS* (1988–1994), *Dyke TV* (1993–2005), and *AIDS Community Television* (1994–1996), as well as the fifteen or so series that aired on the Gay Cable Network between 1982 and 2001. These programs constructed queer counterpublic spaces on television that made possible discussion and debate about LGBTQ issues long before such topics were covered in commercial media. The “AIDS”

episode on *Our Time* is a significant example of this: it offered space for the expression of queer experiences of the AIDS crisis by the producers, hosts, and guests on the show at a moment in which the issue was largely ignored by the mainstream press. As I have argued, the formal aesthetics and editing of the episode construct a televisual mode of emotional pedagogy, making sense of the circulating affects and experiences of the AIDS epidemic to guide the audience toward anger and action as modes of response. The fear and anger showcased on this episode, as well as the wider range of feelings expressed by New Yorkers interviewed on the street, point to the “radical archive of emotion” made visible by early public access television (Cvetkovich 2002, 110). These programs offer a new window into LGBTQ television history by illuminating how cable access stations provided gay and lesbian activists the opportunity to speak for themselves and create media focused on issues affecting their communities.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Lynn Spigel, Nick Davis, Aymar Jean Christian, Larissa Bucholz, and Jennifer Nash, as well as the *Television and New Media* editors and anonymous reviewers, for their thoughtful feedback at various stages of this project. Special thanks to Stephanie and Isabella Herold and Tobias Rodriguez for their endless enthusiasm and support. This article is dedicated to the memory of Vito Russo and to all of the LGBTQ activists who have created cable access television programming in order to speak for themselves.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The author received a Summer Research Travel Grant from the Sexualities Project at Northwestern University which supported research for this article.

### Note

1. I alternate between the terms *gay and lesbian*, *LGBTQ*, and *queer* as I discuss this particular subset of programming. *Gay and lesbian* is consistent with the terminology used in the 1980s and on *Our Time* in particular. However, I use *LGBTQ* to discuss the programming overall because its expansive scope mirrors the expansive range of content on these shows. In addition, I use *queer* as an umbrella term (essentially a synonym for LGBTQ, although this is not a universal practice) and a signal of a radical sensibility and politics.

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