

# A PROGRAMME LIKE NO OTHER

## AIDS PREVENTION IN FRENCH TELEVISION, 1995-1997

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**Abstract:** French television has broadcast health magazines since the 1950s. These magazines generally give more importance to medical expertise and curative medicine. In this article, I will present a programme that stands out from these, *Sidamag*, which was broadcast weekly in the mid-1990s. Targeting a young public and aiming to inform on preventive measures, *Sidamag* producers wanted to give space and voice to non-experts. These three goals were only partially achieved. Preventive measures were present in all *Sidamag* shows however, content analysis showed that only 14% focused on prevention in youth. Furthermore, medical discourse remained dominant although significant space was given to witness testimonials.

**Keywords:** French Television, health magazines, AIDS prevention, youth, medical expertise, non-medical discourse

### 1 Introduction

French television has been broadcasting health magazines since the 1950s, that is from the beginnings of television in France. Health magazines can be defined by their topics, exclusively related to health, and their regular broadcasting, on a daily, weekly, monthly basis.<sup>1</sup> These health programmes generally tend to invite doctors and to promote medical power and discourse, leaving a limited role to patients or their representative associations.<sup>2</sup> One health magazine however intended to provide both non-medical and medical discourses. The producers were hoping for a change from the usual paradigm, by giving more voice (and time) to patients and witnesses.<sup>3</sup> *Sidamag*, as it was called, was broadcasted in the mid-1990s and talked exclusively about AIDS, with an emphasis on preventive measures. In 1995, French public television programme directors asked Emmanuel Hirsch (a radio producer at France Culture at that time) to create a magazine that would talk about AIDS to a young public. *Sidamag* objectives were thus very unusual for a health magazine: to valorize non-medical perspectives, address only one illness and ways to prevent it, and speak to one specific target group.<sup>4</sup> Not only did the *Sidamag* producers hope to give more agency to witnesses and patients in a health show, but they also believed that television might positively influence youth behaviour.

The *Sidamag* experiment was however short-lived and the magazine lasted less than two years. No other health magazine has since been designed for a given public and for a given illness in France. The present study assesses





a radio show entitled *Les Chemins de la Connaissance* [The Pathways to Knowledge] that questioned how knowledge was acquired and diffused. As a philosopher, he has been very much involved in ethics in the medical field and still is today.<sup>26</sup> He has been an active member of the **Arcat-Sida association**, which aims to support AIDS research and promote close relationships between AIDS researchers and HIV-infected patients, since 1986.<sup>27</sup> Hirsch's implication in Arcat-Sida allowed him to see first-hand how the pandemic was challenging the medical power that was firmly held by medical professionals. In the 1980s and 1990s, with the limited understanding of AIDS, the inability to find a cure and the lethal consequences of a HIV infection, patients created efficient patient associations, avidly read any research reports and participated in international research meetings. This implication would result in the patients' recognition as legitimate and full partners in the health sector. At the time television, however, only showed the development of AIDS associations to a mild degree.<sup>28</sup> Emmanuel Hirsch recalls that he felt strongly that television health programmes should adapt their content to offer less professional medical knowledge and more witnesses' insights and suggested a health magazine on AIDS.<sup>29</sup> From September 1995 to February 1997, France3 broadcast a new magazine, *Sidamag*, a weekly health magazine, entirely dedicated to AIDS, whose objectives were to inform, to explain and to prevent. Dedicating a health magazine to a single illness was very unusual and *Sidamag* is indeed the only case for French television. Hirsch has claimed, during an interview for the present study, that it is the only worldwide audiovisual example of such a programme, but the present study has not been able to fully confirm such statement and after an overview of the international research literature.

Also unique to *Sidamag* was the presence of nine medical doctors and researchers on its editorial board:<sup>30</sup> Dr Didier Jayle (in charge of the AIDS information and prevention Ile-de-France center, Broussais Hospital, Paris ); Dr Françoise Linard (psychiatrist in charge of HIV-infected patients, Bichat Hospital, Paris); Professor Jonathan M. Mann (public health professor, first director of the World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS), Dr Christophe Michon (Louis Mourier Hospital, Paris), Dr Gilles Pialoux (Vaccine researcher, Pasteur Institute, Paris), Claude Schneeberger (director of Fontainebleau Hospital), Yves Souteyrand (economist, Paris) Professor Didier Sicard (Cochin Hospital, Paris) and Isabelle Vincenzi (epidemiologist, Saint Maurice Hospital). Their names were given in the opening credits to reinforce the scientific legitimacy of *Sidamag*, in contrast to most health magazines for which medical credits if any are stated at the end of the programmes.

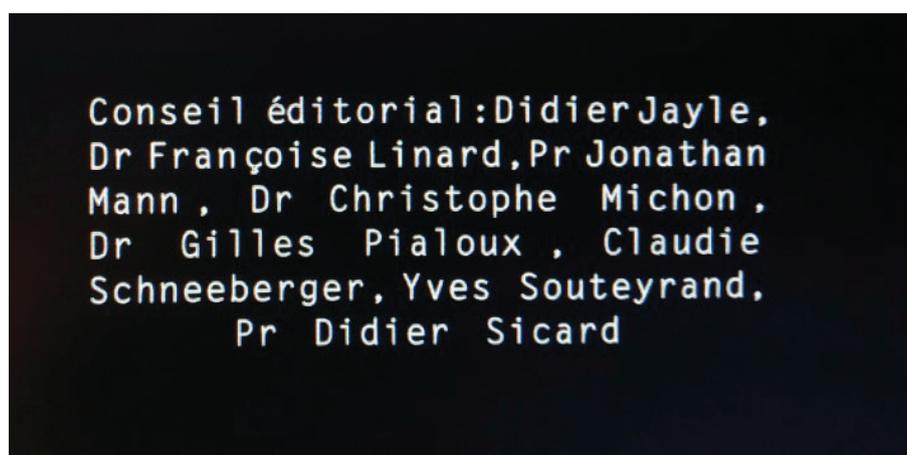


Figure 1. Screenshot from *Sidamag* episode 3, broadcast 23 September 1995 (The picture colours are the original ones for the credit at the beginning of each episode. Note the use of only white and black and of the type machine font).

At the time of *Sidamag* broadcast, all the editorial board members were actively doing research on AIDS and/or treating HIV-infected people and/or AIDS associations' members. Hirsch remembers the editorial boards members would suggest patients' names during the editorial meeting on the Tuesdays, enabling the *Sidamag* audiovisual professionals to film and edit reports for the following Saturday broadcast.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2 The *Sidamag* Hosts

It was France3 management that suggested Pascal Sanchez would be the perfect host for *Sidamag*.<sup>32</sup> Since Pascal Sanchez was unreachable for the present study, statements found in the *Sidamag* press release or written press contents during the 1990s were used to assess his role as a *Sidamag* host.

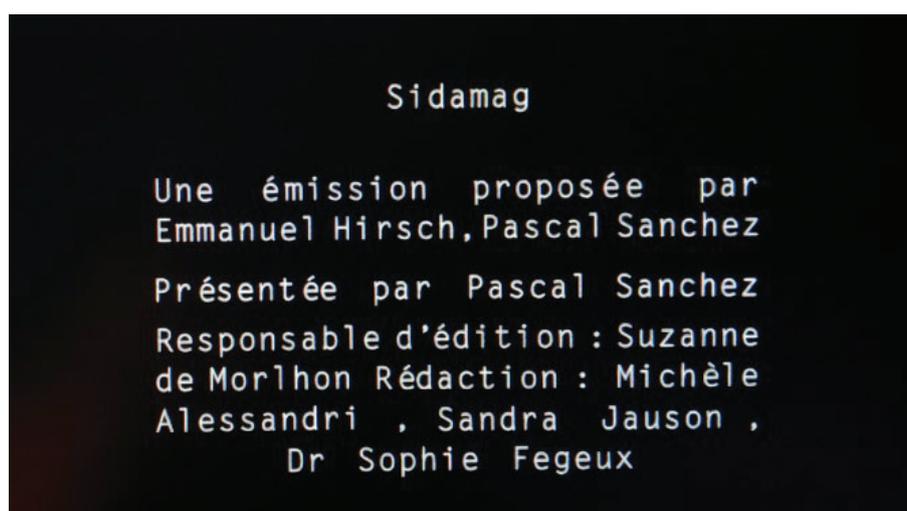


Figure 2. Screenshot from *Sidamag* episode 2, broadcast 16 September 1995 (again, note the deliberate choice of black and white and the dull font).

Although Sanchez was called a co-producer in the credit lists at the beginning and the end of each *Sidamag* episode, Hirsch states Sanchez was not involved in the reports and guest choices. However, according to the France 3 directors as said by Hirsch, Sanchez was the best presenter for a young public.<sup>33</sup>

Prior to *Sidamag*, Sanchez was the main host of a television magazine targeting 15-25-year olds. Lasting 30 minutes, and filmed live, the magazine entitled *Une pêche d'enfer* [A Burst of Energy] was broadcast from December 1987 to June 1995. The *pêche d'enfer* programmes were extremely well perceived by young people, who appreciated to be talked to as young adults. Mostly filled with fun and light information,<sup>34</sup> Sanchez decided to broadcast several episodes exclusively about AIDS with the objective to improve medical knowledge and prevention among youth. To give two examples, Dr Willy Rosenbaum, doctor at Claude Bernard Hospital, Paris and researcher in Montagnier's laboratory, was the main guest for the episode broadcast 28 June 1993 and Philippe Douste-Blazy, Health Minister from 30 March 1993 to 11 May 1995, was a guest on 15 September 1994.

Pascal Sanchez was the host for the first fifty *Sidamag* episodes. He later hosted television sports magazines, then disappeared from television in the 2000s. Sanchez was replaced by Carole Gaessler for the next twenty *Sidamag* episodes. Gaessler had been an anchorwoman for the France3 weekend news magazine since 1996. The reason for Sanchez's replacement by a young female host was never addressed during the *Sidamag* broadcast. When questioned about the host change, Emmanuel Hirsch answered that Carole Gaessler was a recognized journalist.<sup>35</sup> His short answer suggested possible professional tensions, but any analysis of this is beyond the goal of the present study.

### 3.3 Overall Features of *Sidamag*

The *Sidamag* episodes all shared the following features. Lasting 15 to 16 minutes, they were hosted by Pascal Sanchez for the first 1-50 episodes and Carole Gaessler for the subsequent 51-70 episodes, broadcast on a weekly

basis every Saturday morning at 10:05 am (for the 1-64 episodes) and at 2:30 pm on Tuesday for the last six episodes. Pascal Sanchez believed that his name known to many young people from *Une pêche d'enfer* would attract these viewers even at the early morning time. Furthermore, the *Sidamag* episodes were broadcast a second time on Tuesday evenings, possibly attracting a different public. However, the *Sidamag* audience was fairly low, with at the highest with an 11.3 per cent audience share on 10 February 1996 and at the lowest with only a 2.4 per cent audience share on 14 September 1996.<sup>36</sup>

Sanchez opened each episode with the following words: "Every Saturday morning, we have an appointment with AIDS current news, to inform, to explain and to understand for a better prevention and most of all, for solidarity. We will take a different look, a closer one, a more empathic one, a truer one, a more human one. *Sidamag*, because we are all concerned". Carole Gaessler skipped the introduction and preferred to briefly outline the content of the episode.

Since the producers were very keen to emphasize that AIDS had become part of the viewers' everyday life, Sanchez, then Gaessler were filmed strolling in Paris streets (when appropriate) (See Figures 3 and 4) and he or she would briefly introduce two edited reports per episodes. These reports lasted 2 to 4 minutes each and the witnesses were briefly presented before the reports (a HIV-infected person, a member of the family of a HIV-infected person, a prisoner, etc.). During the reports, the journalist's voice was very rarely heard, leaving space for the witness' words. The witnesses were usually shown in their everyday life, in their intimate or professional environment. In addition to these edited reports, the *Sidamag* hosts extensively interviewed for 5 to 8 minutes one guest in a friendly relaxed situation, in a coffee-bar or a park.



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Sidamag* episode 3, 23 September 1995.



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Sidamag* episode 58, 2 November 1996.

After 70 episodes without any major changes in the *Sidamag* format apart from the introduction, Carole Gaessler started the next episode with the following words:

“AIDS has now become a chronic disease and no longer a deadly one thanks to triple antiretroviral therapies. Therefore the editorial board has decided to stop exclusively addressing AIDS and to talk about other chronic illnesses. The magazine will from now on also change its name to *Vivre avec* [To live with...].”<sup>37</sup>

Hirsch explained that it was time to offer the same space for witnesses living with other chronic and life altering illnesses.<sup>38</sup> Acting on this change, the first *Vivre avec...* episode addressed Alzheimer’s disease and was clearly no longer intended for a young public.<sup>39</sup> For the present study, the *Vivre avec....* episodes were not studied, due to the major changes in the magazine objectives.

### 3.4 *Sidamag* Contents Analyses for Prevention Content, Non-Professional Voice

As explained above, four categories were used for the *Sidamag* contents firstly for the reports and secondly for the interviews. The 70 episodes included 143 reports: with 57 (40 per cent) addressing prevention, 33 medical information, 3 purely research and 50 everyday life. In coherence with the *Sidamag* objectives, prevention was very much present through all the 70 episodes. The prevention content category was next subdivided in the following subcategories: prevention campaigns, prevention for specific adult publics, prevention for young public and prevention for health professionals. The relative weight for the four subcategories is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Relative weight of the 4 prevention subcategories.

Reports showing prevention campaigns	31	~ 54 %
Reports showing prevention for specific adult publics	12	~ 21 %
Reports showing prevention for young people	8	~14%
Reports showing prevention for health professionals	6	~ 10%
Total number of reports	57	100 %

*Sidamag* producers clearly believed that seeing a prevention spot on television had a powerful effect, since more than half of the reports treating prevention used part of them. *Sidamag* included prevention spots or campaigns from France, but also, in alphabetical order, some from Brazil, Burkina Faso, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Spain, Portugal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Vietnam. These prevention campaigns or spots were usually not commented by the presenter or his guests after they were broadcast. These health campaigns aiming to curve human behaviour may have indeed a greater effect on young people than on the general population, suggesting the young people are more receptive to prevention.<sup>40</sup> Television AIDS prevention has a lot to do with how the public visualizes sexuality and it is known that viewers also learn sexual behaviour from fictional content. To this regard, although not based on programmes broadcast in the 1990s, a recent study may help to offer food for thought: in a recent study on sex and television, it was found that less than 1 per cent of 2578 television sex scenes (in fiction programmes) mentioned AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases, suggesting that fictional authors do not believe they have or must have a role in AIDS prevention.<sup>41</sup> It could be argued that health magazines would be the best programmes for learning about safe sex, albeit keeping in mind that those with potentially dangerous behaviour are the least receptive to the arguments found in a behavioural campaign.

Thus, *Sidamag* adopted a very classical method to talk about prevention: by broadcasting campaign spots, instead of pushing imaginative or innovative methods, as the AIDS associations were doing. Even though *Sidamag* had a strong relationship with AIDS associations (Hirsch and half of the members of the programme's editorial board being members of AIDS associations), this did not provide for original prevention reports targeting a young public.

As said above, *Sidamag* presented reports and interviews and Sanchez and Gaessler interviewed a guest in each of the 70 episodes. It was found that 31 of the guests only had a general discourse – such as asking people to use condoms – possibly because they were not AIDS experts but musicians or singers, for example. That these laypersons were not HIV-positive was possibly because in the 1990s, societal taboos surrounding AIDS and sexuality discouraged HIV-positive guests from being interviewed on television and *Sidamag* privileged the report format where editing was possible. Of the remaining 39 guests having a specific AIDS subject they wished to talk about, 11 mainly exchanged about HIV prevention (28 per cent), 10 talked about research (26 per cent), 16 about medical information (41 per cent) and 2 on everyday life (less than 1 per cent), in sharp contrast with the number of the reports in relation to the everyday life of HIV-infected in the *Sidamag* reports. This can be easily explained by the increased presence of witnesses in *Sidamag* reports. As for the prevention category, its relative weight was significantly less, in accordance to the *Sidamag* producers' assumption that prevention was best treated by professional prevention spots or best understood by viewing a campaign. For the 11 guests explicitly talking about prevention, they were very cautious to not stigmatize or to talk about any specific population and none talked about homosexuals or drug users.

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Sidamag* had three main objectives: to hear non-medical points of view, to present preventive topics and to address a young public. The present analysis showed that these three goals were only partially





## Biography

Pascale Mansier has a background in biology and in media studies. She has a long-standing interest in audio-visual treatment of health-related topics, focusing on the various health magazines broadcast over the last fifty years of French television. Her recent research contributions relate to science uncertainty acceptance by the layperson, media coverage of the 2015 Paris attacks, and more specifically how victims were portrayed.