

HIV / AIDS and the print media: An overview of literature on coverage of the HIV / AIDS pandemic

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Abstract

This conceptual paper seeks to evaluate the coverage of HIV and AIDS issues in print media in the world. The paper evaluates the impact of the print media on social change in relation to HIV/AIDS; determines the attention the print media devote to the coverage of HIV/AIDS; and finds out whether the amount of coverage of the epidemic increased or decreased over time. The paper argues that the influence of the media in the modern era cannot be ignored because of its potential to mould public opinion and to create connectivity between the government and the public. It has been recognised that since the media exists to provide information and education to populations worldwide it is a powerful tool that can be mobilized against HIV and AIDS. Media coverage ensures that HIV / AIDS is seen as an important issue requiring a coherent national policy response.

Keywords: HIV, AIDS, print media, health, advocacy, epidemic, information, education

1. Introduction

USAID (2006) states that media is an important ally in any public health situation. It serves the role of being a source of information as well as an advocate for correct health behaviours. Panos (2001) suggests that the aim of media advocacy is to increase the capacity of groups or societies to act in a manner consistent with their goals. Media advocacy is therefore part of an overall plan for achieving social change. In this regard, social change is construed as the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health (Panos, 2001).

The influence that media has on health issues was noted by the World Summit of Ministers of Health. The role of the media in confronting the HIV/AIDS epidemic cannot be overestimated. The 1998 London Declaration made by the World Summit of Ministers of Health stated that, "In the absence at present of a vaccine or cure for AIDS, the single most important component of national AIDS programmes is information and education" (World Health Organisation, 1998).

2. Statement of the Problem

Human Immuno Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) have hogged the limelight in the print media since it was discovered. There was a time when the media have been producing stories on HIV and AIDS almost on a daily basis. Despite all the coverage HIV and AIDS has remained the number one killer of humankind. Thus, this paper seeks to evaluate the coverage of HIV and AIDS issues in print media in the world. Specifically the paper seeks to evaluate the impact of the print media on social change in relation to HIV/AIDS; determine the attention the print media devote to the coverage of HIV/AIDS; and find out whether the amount of coverage of the epidemic increased or decreased over time.

3. Methodology

This paper is simply document analysis and personal observation of the developments in the relationship between HIV and AIDS and the print media. The paper is therefore largely literature review of the HIV and AIDS and print media relationship.

4. The impact of Print Media on social change in relation to HIV and AIDS

Gomes, Ahmed and Barual (2014) posit that the majority of the people's only access to HIV/AIDS information is through the print media such as newspapers and magazines. Therefore the need for accurate news reporting on HIV/AIDS is imperative. HIV and AIDS news is continuously evolving with new epidemiological information, new scientific information and new government policies on the issue addressed frequently worldwide. Gomes et al. (2014) also reiterate on the need for background articles on HIV/AIDS and sexual health with general educational value and safer sex behaviour if the fight against the scourge is to be maintained. In addition, Chapman (1994) and Radford (1996) argue that the print media is the leading source of information about health issues. It is from newspaper reports that the majority of the public learns about HIV. Both planned campaigns and unplanned mass media coverage can have consistent positive effects on health service utilization.

In a review of newspapers on HIV/AIDS reporting, the Australian Journalism (2014) states that newspapers are influential because news stories that appear in print or online are frequently used by radio and

television news editors to provide background, and often actual content, for their daily broadcast news services. The press can keep issues and debates in the public forum and move items onto and up the political agenda. Similarly Bertrand and Anghang (2006) concluded that there was evidence that print-media news can influence the risk-behaviours of young people in terms of HIV acquisition.

Despite Bertrand and Anghang (2006) and the Australian Journalism (2014) supporting that print media was the most suitable media for printing HIV/AIDS stories, Galloway (2001) found that newspaper had low coverage as compared to other types of media. Galloway (2001) indicated that newspaper was the least accessible form of media with 55% of South Africans as compared to approximately 92% of South Africans who have access to radio, and 76% to television.

In a study by Jeay (1998) in Mali results indicated that men read newspapers three times more than women. This is supported by Wolitski, Bensley, and Corby (1996) who observe that the relative accessibility of television, radio or newspapers as the main source of media information differs by location as well as by population and gender groups. Exposure to specific mass media sources is related to gender, ethnicity and risk status.

According to Guantlett (2002) media plays a big role in conventional Canadian Society. It is becoming more and more influential and a bigger part of everyone's daily lives. Since the invention and spread of the use of printing press in the mid-fifteen-hundreds, societies have been able to produce mass quantities of information available to the general public. Newspapers are information holders of the accepted values and components of the society.

Daily Sangram (1997) found that women are greatly under-represented when it comes to HIV/AIDS reporting in the print media. Another view raised by Daily Sangram (1997) was that the reporting of HIV/AIDS in the print media has raised the issue of morality in Bangladesh. Reporting on the coverage on HIV/AIDS between 1994 and 1998 in Bangladesh Daily Sangram (1997) bemoans that as a result of the consumerism, irrespective of nation and religion, free sex is increasing everywhere, and mass media is producing cheap stuff to tickle the sexual urge of people.

5. Amount of coverage of HIV and AIDS over time in Print Media

The reporting of HIV/ AIDS stories in the print media seems to be fluctuating. The study by Duncan (2009) found that the frequency with which HIV is dealt with by the media has fallen by around 63%. The rate at which HIV -related articles are given front page status has fallen even more markedly. This is indicative of a drop in the news value accorded to the epidemic by the print media. Duncan (2009) also found out that there was a decrease in the number of experienced journalists writing on the epidemic and an increase of articles that are written by authors who do not cover the topic with regularity as a part of their specialisation.

A study by the Panos (2004) analysed newspaper reporting of HIV and AIDS in eight Southern African countries from 1985 - 2003. These included: South Africa, Botswana, Malawi, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The major overall finding from these countries is the improvement in press coverage from the early 1980s when there was a lack of understanding, and stories on HIV/AIDS were often sensational in content and insensitive to sufferers. By the 1990s, the language underwent a transformation and descriptions of 'killer disease' and 'AIDS victims' were dropped and replaced by the more sensitive 'PLWA' (People Living with AIDS) and 'AIDS pandemic'. There was also a push to widen coverage and report the story as a development issue rather than a purely health related matter. And there were more stories of hope with a flurry of reports when antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) were introduced. Most importantly, negative reports, scary statistics and photographs of emaciated PLWA were less prevalent than during the early stages of coverage.

The report, entitled AIDS at 21: Media coverage of the HIV Epidemic, 1981-2002, revealed that total press coverage increased during the 1980s, peaked in 1987 and declined steadily from then to 2002 (Kaiser, 2003). Minor peaks in coverage coincided with major developments in the epidemic, which is event driven. For example, with Magic Johnson's announcement in 1991 that he was living with the virus. Also, the introduction of highly active anti-retroviral drugs in 1996 and increased attention to the global epidemic in 2001 led to a significant rise in the number of HIV stories.

Event driven reporting has been found to increase the reporting of HIV/AIDS in some countries. Panos (2004) laments that stories on HIV/AIDS remain largely event and personality driven and there are few adequately trained staff to report on this complex disease. Despite the dramatic rise in the number of stories on HIV and AIDS, Botswana saw an increase from three stories in 1995 to 402 in 2003. The quality of reporting was still in question with greater emphasis placed on statistics, speeches, workshops and conferences (Panos, 2004, p. 28). For example, in Malawi, the survey revealed that 59 per cent of stories on HIV/AIDS sampled in 2003 were event-driven and tended to focus more on the personalities who organised the event or delivered the speech at the expense of in-depth analysis of the epidemic (Panos, 2004, p. 55).

On the other hand, Moeller (2000) argues that consistent and quality international media attention to Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome in Africa has been long time in coming largely because the media

reflects the pervasive political climate and follows the lead of those with power. Moeller points out that the international media turned en masse to AIDS coverage in the weeks before the Durban 2000 AIDS conference, flocking to cover the emergency now that it was government-certified.

In another event driven issue Bracken (2000) also argues that there has been a sudden increase in international coverage of the sub-Saharan epidemic since 1999. However, he lists a larger confluence events as the impetus for turning to a major story long ignored, including: the decision by the White House to categorize AIDS in Africa as a threat to national security; the focus on drug prices and pharmaceutical company profits; and the outrage provoked by President Mbeki's skepticism about the relationship between HIV and AIDS. Bracken (2000) points out that the shock of seeing the Pulitzer Prize for international coverage awarded to an alternative weekly, *The Village Voice*, for Mark Schoofs' series 'AIDS: The Agony of Africa' which is replete with haunting stories of people and communities grappling with HIV/AIDS and a contextualised analysis of the difficulties confronting African governments in dealing with the epidemic, may also have prompted chastened newspaper editors to re-examine their own commitments to the issue.

Although the decline in media coverage appears to mirror a drop in the number of new AIDS cases in the United States, Kaiser (2003) argues that the decline began six years before the number of new AIDS cases began to decrease. In addition, the decline in coverage continued as the total number of AIDS cases in the United States rose above 500,000. Over the 22-year time period, 94% of the stories included in the review had U.S. datelines and 86% of the stories presented a U.S.-only perspective on the epidemic. However, the number of stories presenting some global aspect of the epidemic increased 118% between 1997 and 2002, and the number of articles with a domestic-only focus decreased 57% over the same time period. In addition, the study found that after 1986, media coverage of HIV/AIDS among gay men accounted for 5% or less of the overall coverage. Other specific populations disproportionately affected by the epidemic also received "relatively little" coverage, with 3% of stories focusing on U.S. minorities, 3% on teens and young adults and 2% on women, the study says. Overall, the focus of coverage has shifted away from stories about HIV transmission and social issues toward stories about government funding and philanthropic efforts, (Kaiser, 2003).

Kaiser (2003) concluded that the overall decline in the total number of stories on HIV/AIDS and stories focusing on domestic AIDS issues could be evidence of what some have called AIDS fatigue on the part of media organizations. However, the decline in coverage also is consistent with the usual and customary news practice to focus on other things when an epidemic switches to a global focus, the study says. Kaiser (2003) went further, to say that the trend is particularly disturbing in light of the fact that the number of new AIDS cases in 2002 increased for the first time since 1993. The findings raise the question of whether media outlets covering the epidemic have a responsibility to educate the public, as opposed to focusing only on reporting the news, the study says. Although the media's shift to a more global focus on the epidemic is particularly important given its enormity and growing impact in many parts of the world, maintaining some focus on the domestic epidemic while telling these and other new stories will remain a challenge for journalists competing for limited news space, the study concludes.

6. HIV and AIDS Information on transmission, prevention, testing, and treatment

Kaiser (2004) carried out a review of print media on HIV and AIDS coverage and found that after 21 years of coverage, the five most dominant stories included HIV prevention and protection (18 per cent), research (13 per cent), transmission (13 per cent), and social issues such as discrimination and stigma (10 per cent). Roth and Hogan (2001) posit that the most powerful role of the media is in defining the challenge of HIV/AIDS for the general population especially given that the way a problem is defined determines the way people try to solve it.

Moeller (1999) argues that media audiences are especially dependent on the media as information sources and for guidelines about how to feel and how to react to the pandemic that faced humanity. The media therefore has an essential function in social learning to provide the information that will empower ordinary people and to transmit the ideas that structure people's thinking and make up the raw material of what we identify as public opinion (Altschull, 1990). However, Nelkin (1995) points out that the educative role of the media for HIV/AIDS prevention has been constrained in so far as news reports have tended (in some contexts) to convey an unrealistic and even counterproductive social message about how to prevent the spread of AIDS through abstain.

Australian Journalism Review (2014) reported that Sri Lanka's health care system has been identified as one of the best in fighting HIV and AIDS related issues. Sri Lanka provides free ART, counselling, testing and other HIV prevention services. While the quality of these services is good, however, the print media coverage and utilization was poor. Only 40.6% utilization of ART; 11.9% of services for prevention of vertical transmission; and 10% co-management of TB and HIV treatment news were in the print media.

Cullen (2000) revealed that while editors and journalists did cover the HIV and AIDS stories, they preferred to report official figures for HIV together with news items on workshops, budgets and international donations. Educational messages on HIV prevention were omitted (Cullen, 2000). It is evident from the data on

press coverage of the disease in PNG and Southern Africa, that a disproportionate emphasis was placed upon reporting infection rates, international funding and regional workshops, with little in-depth analysis of the disease or educational content.

7. Conclusion

The influence of the media in the modern era cannot be ignored because of its potential to mould public opinion and to create connectivity between the government and the public. Responsible media is capable of transforming livelihoods particularly because of the trust the people have in electronic channels such as the internet, television and radio. Besides, print media in Zimbabwe commands a lot of influence because of the literacy rate currently above ninety per cent of the total population (Mutanda, 2012). It has been recognised that since the media exists to provide information and education to populations worldwide it is a powerful tool that can be mobilized against HIV and AIDS. The occupational culture of journalism promotes neutrality which provides a countervailing pull against an advocacy or social change agenda within the media. Despite this, media coverage nevertheless ensures that HIV / AIDS is seen as an important issue requiring a coherent national policy response.

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