**Research**

**HIV/AIDS communication in four Nigerian mainstream newspapers**

Onjefu Okidu\(^{1,2}\)

1Department of Mass Communication, Caleb University, Lagos, Nigeria
2Corresponding author: Onjefu Okidu, Department of Mass Communication, Caleb University, Lagos, Nigeria

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**Introduction:**

One consensus in discussions on HIV/AIDS communication in low and middle income countries (LMICs) is the need for communication models to focus on activity rather than cognitive indicators in order to achieve desired improvements in health behaviors and outcomes. Past failures of HIV/AIDS communication efforts in LMICs have been attributed to emphasis on cognitive indicators. This study analyses HIV/AIDS communication models in Nigerian newspapers.

**Methods:**

Data were obtained through analysis of manifest content of four Nigerian papers issued between 2002 and 2004. Frequency, prominence and space dedicated to HIV/AIDS-related topics were measured. Descriptive statistics were used to highlight the frequency and percentage of cognitive- and activity-oriented information on HIV/AIDS.

**Results:**

A total of 464 HIV/AIDS-related articles were identified. Fifty-nine percent (274) of articles were activity-oriented. Over half of articles were news stories. No news story made front and back pages lead. There were only nine editorials on HIV/AIDS.

**Conclusion:**

This study shows that the activity model of HIV/AIDS communication dominates the four Nigerian mainstream newspapers studied. However, it is worth noting the limited number of editorials and feature articles, which have the capacity to stimulate debate and foster a social environment in which AIDS is addressed in a spirit of openness. For a country that has the third largest number of people living with HIV/AIDS globally, one would expect the mass media to deliberately play an instrumental and a more active role in the battle against the disease by engaging in in-depth contextual discourse on HIV/AIDS.

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**Introduction:**

Current thought in HIV/AIDS communication in low and middle income countries foregrounds the need to move beyond the cognitive approach to the activity approach [1]. Cognitive models of behavior change communication like the Health Belief Model, the Theory of Reasoned Action, Social Learning Theory, and the AIDS Risk Reduction Model (ARRM), which dominated the first decade of social science research on HIV/AIDS, assume that individual reason provides the impetus for human action [2]. The models seek to interpret and analyze health behaviors at the individual level. HIV/AIDS cognitive information refers to information about HIV/AIDS that focuses on individual self-efficacy and emphasizes the simple, linear relationship between individual knowledge and action [3]. The activity model of behavior change communication derives from the activity theory. This model views behavioral outcome as a product of the individual's context and argues that human activity is complex and socially-bound and driven and not simply the sum of individual actions [4]. HIV/AIDS activity information was defined as information about HIV/AIDS that extends the framing of HIV/AIDS from primarily an individual function to one that is linked to more macro socio-economic, cultural and political contexts [5].

Although, cognitive models have been effective in western contexts [6], some scholars and practitioners argue that these models are inadequate for HIV/AIDS communication in low and middle income countries [6]. Following this realization, calls have been made for a shift from the cognitive to the activity model of HIV/AIDS communication [6]. The importance of a nationally-driven agenda in lowering incidence and mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS in low and middle income countries was not lost on Nigeria which, in 2001, launched a multi-sectoral and community-based response to the epidemic, exemplified in the HIV/AIDS Emergency Action Plan (HEAP; 2001-2004) and the National Strategic Framework (NSF; 2005-2009).

However, a dominant view in the literature is that the mass media in low and middle income countries are yet to transition from cognitive models to the activity model of HIV communication [6]. Presently, there is little...
literature systematically addressing the response of the mass media to HIV/AIDS in low and middle income countries. The severity of the HIV epidemic in low and middle income countries and the immense potential that the media have to contribute to its prevention and control both justify the need for an examination of their media content in order to ascertain the level of response. Such an examination may yield information that can help strengthen policies and advance effective strategic partnerships in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts.

Methods

Using data from a recent comparative study on HIV/AIDS cognitive and activity-oriented information content in four mainstream Nigerian newspapers, this paper examines: (a) the number of HIV/AIDS cognitive and activity information carried by Nigerian newspapers (b) amount of space devoted to HIV/AIDS cognitive and activity information by Nigerian newspapers, and (c) the location of HIV/AIDS cognitive and activity information in Nigerian newspapers. In other words, three variables (frequency, space and prominence) were measured in this study which covered a three-year period (2002–2004).

Although HIV was first reported in Nigeria in 1986, the study period coincided with the implementation of the first phase of Nigeria's multi-sectoral and community-based national response to the epidemic. The four newspapers surveyed in the present study are the Guardian, Punch, New Nigerian and Daily Trust. The Guardian and Punch are published in southern Nigeria while New Nigerian and Daily Trust are published in the North. These papers represent an important outlet for health information. They have been in the forefront of the crusade against HIV/AIDS [7]. In addition, newspapers are widely cited sources of information on HIV/AIDS issues in Nigeria [8].

Coding: Coders, working in pairs, coded newspaper items independently of one another. Each pair of coders coded all issues of the same newspaper during the study period according to the coding scheme. Coding focused on manifest content. Data extraction and recording were performed manually. All coders were final-year undergraduate students of Mass Communication enrolled in print journalism in three Nigerian tertiary institutions (the University of Lagos, Lagos State University and Kaduna Polytechnic). The coders were carefully recruited and trained to code. The training of coders included one 2-hour session a day for two weeks. The categories for coding HIV/AIDS-related content of the newspapers were based on those developed by Journalists Against AIDS (JAAIDS), Nigeria in 2003 on the coverage of HIV/AIDS in eleven Nigerian newspapers. The JAAIDS categories are similar to those Pratt et al. [9] used in their study of HIV/AIDS information in African popular magazines and medical journals. According to Stempel [10], “there are real advantages to using a category system that has been used in other studies” because validity and reliability are largely addressed.

Intercoder Reliability: Intercoder reliability was measured using Krippendorff’s alpha [11]. Krippendorff’s alpha score for the Newspapers ranged from 0.891 to 0.944 (The Guardian, 0.891; The Punch, 0.918; New Nigerian, 0.936; Trust, 0.944). Considering these results, the coding sheet and the coders were deemed fit for the study.

Results

Coders identified a total of 464 pieces of HIV/AIDS-related information in the four newspapers corresponding to a total attention score of 571 and 22293.8 column centimeters of information space. The data were analyzed to ascertain the attention paid to HIV/AIDS cognitive-oriented information and HIV/AIDS activity-oriented information in terms of information frequency, prominence and space. One hundred and forty-five (31%) pieces of HIV/AIDS-related information were in The Punch; 116 (25%) in the New Nigerian; 111 (24%) in The Guardian, and 92 (20%) in the Daily Trust. In terms of prominence, The Punch had the highest attention scores, 176 (31%). Daily Trust had 150 (26%); New Nigerian, 131 (23%) and The Guardian, 114 (20%). New Nigerian recorded the highest column centimeters with regards to HIV/AIDS information space, 6771.9 (30%); The Punch, 6023.6 (27%); Daily Trust, 5263.5 (24%) and The Guardian, 4234.8 (19%). The total number of HIV/AIDS activity-oriented information published by the four Nigerian newspapers was more than the total number of HIV/AIDS cognitive-oriented information during the period studied. Two hundred and seventy four (59%) pieces of HIV/AIDS-related information were activity-oriented. Apart from the Daily Trust which published an equal number of activity and cognitive information, all the other newspapers published more activity than cognitive information. The proportions of activity-oriented pieces of HIV/AIDS-related information were 64.7% in the New Nigerian; 61.4% in The Punch; 57.7% in The Guardian and 50% in the Daily Trust.

Altogether, the four newspapers devoted a total of 276 news stories to HIV/AIDS (64.9% activity-oriented). The proportions of activity-oriented HIV/AIDS news stories in the Daily Trust was 59.3%; The Guardian 61.7%; New Nigerian, 67.7%, and The Punch 67.1%. Out of the 279 attention scores allotted to all the news stories in the content categories, activity-oriented news stories had more points than cognitive-oriented news stories; 70.6% (197). No news story on HIV/AIDS made front and back pages lead. There were equal numbers of HIV/AIDS activity and cognitive front page news stories. However, among the news stories which constituted the back page, page 2 and other inside pages, activity-oriented news stories had more attention scores than cognitive-oriented news stories. Overall, HIV/AIDS news stories occupied 11637.8 column centimeters. While HIV/AIDS activity-oriented news stories accounted for 59.7% (6951.9col.cms), HIV/AIDS cognitive-oriented news stories accounted for 40.3% (or 4685.9 col.cms).

Two of the four newspapers (Daily Trust and New Nigerian) did not publish HIV/AIDS editorials at all during the period studied. There were...
nine editorials on HIV/AIDS. Eight of these appeared in The Guardian. Of
the eight editorials in The Guardian, five were activity-oriented. The only
editorial featured in The Punch was cognitive-oriented.

There were more HIV/AIDS activity-oriented feature articles (60.7%)
than HIV/AIDS cognitive-oriented feature articles. Seventy-one percent
of feature articles in the Daily Trust were activity-oriented as were 56.4% in
The Guardian, 60.0% in the New Nigerian, and 63.6% in the Punch.
The ratio of space in col.cms occupied by HIV/AIDS activity-oriented
feature articles to HIV/AIDS cognitive-oriented feature articles in all
the newspapers put together indicates that HIV/AIDS activity-oriented
feature articles occupied more space than HIV/AIDS cognitive feature
articles. During the period studied, the four Nigerian newspapers devoted
a space of 5341.1 col.cms (or 50.6%) to activity-oriented feature articles
and a space of 5221 col.cms (or 49.4%) to cognitive-oriented feature
articles. In the New Nigerian and the Punch however, HIV/AIDS cognitive-
oriented feature articles occupied more space than HIV/AIDS activity-
oriented feature articles. In New Nigerian 44.4% (240col.cms) of space
was dedicated to activity-oriented feature articles while 48.6% (2040 col.
cms) was dedicated to activity-oriented feature stories. The Guardian
and the Daily Trust devoted more space to HIV/AIDS activity-oriented
feature articles (56.4% (2640.5 col.cms)) and 70% (420.6 col.cms)
respectively.

There were thirty-five HIV/AIDS-related advertisements in the four
newspapers. Overall, there were more cognitive-oriented advertisements
(60.0%). However, a greater proportion of advertisement messages in
The Guardian and New Nigerian had three and two HIV/AIDS-related
advertisements respectively, all of which were activity-oriented. The
Daily Trust had 21 advertisements of which 16 (76.2%) were cognitive-
oriented. There were nine HIV/AIDS-related advertisements in The Punch
of which five were cognitive-oriented.

Discussion

To understand the response of the media in Nigeria to the call for
transition from cognitive to activity-oriented models of HIV/AIDS
communication, a comparative analysis of HIV/AIDS information in four
Nigerian mainstream newspapers was conducted. The predominance
in coverage of HIV/AIDS activity-oriented information as identified in
the four newspapers suggests that HIV/AIDS contextual issues receive
considerable attention. The dominance of activity-oriented HIV/AIDS
content information contradicts the view of some scholars [1, 5, 13-16]
that insufficient attention has been paid by the mass media in developing
countries to the activity model of HIV/AIDS communication. It also
suggests that Nigerian newspapers might have been responding to global
reviews of HIV/AIDS communication, such as, for example, the new
UNAIDS (1999) communication framework. The UNAIDS framework calls
for a shift from individual-level theories and models of preventive health
behaviours (health belief models, theory of reasoned action, stages of
change, AIDS Risk Reduction Model and others) to multilevel models that
take into account cultural and contextual factors.

The dominance of activity information further shows that Nigerian
newspapers in their expanded roles may be capable of providing
national and international models of strategic responses to diseases.
The dominance of HIV/AIDS activity-oriented editorials as well as
feature articles is critical because these items, more than news stories,
have the capacity to lay bare the ways in which HIV/AIDS exacerbates
social prejudices, economic inequalities, discriminatory practices and
political injustices. Although, editorials and feature articles have the
capacity to stimulate debate and foster a social environment in which
AIDS is addressed in a spirit of openness, news stories dominated the
HIV/AIDS information items studied. The relative lack of editorials and
feature articles may suggest ambivalence occasioned by lack of skill and
acknowledge on the part of editorial and feature writers.

None of the papers sampled used an HIV/AIDS story as front or back
page lead. Furthermore, both HIV/AIDS activity and cognitive stories
have very low attention scores on the front and back pages. A number
of reasons could be adduced for it. It could be that the urge to sell
had conditioned the perception of the newspapers towards considering
HIV/AIDS stories less sensational than other news items. It could also
be a manifestation of the natural inclination of the papers to follow
occurrences that had “greater” social impact. Indeed, the Nigerian mass
media within the period covered by this study focused more on intriguing
and sensational social, political and economic issues in Nigeria.

A striking feature of the four Nigerian newspapers coverage of HIV/
AIDS information was the dominance of HIV/AIDS cognitive-oriented
advertisement messages. This is not surprising, as advertisers and
advertisement copy writers in Nigeria as elsewhere determine the content
and space of advertisement messages.

Study findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations.
First, the sample was not randomized and is based on a small sample
of newspapers. Results cannot therefore be generalized to the entire
Nigerian newspapers and other mass media. Second, tracing the evolution
of newspaper reporting on HIV in Nigeria over a longer period of time
would have offered a broader comparative analysis of the transition from
cognitive to activity model of communication. These are areas for further
research.

Conclusion

This study shows that the activity model of HIV/AIDS communication
dominates the four Nigerian mainstream newspapers studied. It is
possible that this trend is common to other Nigerian mass media outlets.
Perhaps, the considerable global review of HIV/AIDS communication
practices that have taken place and the relative positive national
response have provided broader basis for contextual redirection for the
mass media in some developing countries. However, it is worth noting the
limited number of editorials and feature articles, which have the capacity
to stimulate debate and foster a social environment in which AIDS is
addressed in a spirit of openness. For a country that has the third largest
number of people living with HIV/AIDS, globally, one would expect the
mass media to deliberately play an instrumental and a more active role
in the battle against the disease by engaging in more in-depth contextual
discourse.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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