
Articles

Reporting HIV in Papua New Guinea: Trends and omissions from 2000 to 2010

ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings from a longitudinal content analysis on the reporting of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in Papua New Guinea's two national newspapers—*The National and Post-Courier*—in 2000, 2005 and 2010. The authors tried to answer two key questions: Did press coverage of the disease increase and did the topics change or remain the same? Data from the content analysis showed that coverage of the disease increased significantly during the ten-year study period, and that the framing of the disease moved beyond representing HIV as purely a health story to one that was linked to socio-economic conditions and cultural practices. The feature stories gradually showed more sensitivity to people living with HIV, while they recognised and challenged the social stigma still associated with the disease in much of the country.

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Introduction: The HIV epidemic in PNG

IN COUNTRIES where HIV is a serious public health threat, journalists have a responsibility to inform the public about the situation. Whereas HIV is not a major health issue in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and other small Pacific countries, it is classified as an evolving generalised epidemic in Papua New Guinea. The United Nations AIDS programme (UNAIDS, 2009) estimates that there are at least 54,000 people living with HIV in Papua New Guinea, and forecasts that by 2012, the country will face a prevalence rate of more than 5 percent, with more than 200,000 people

being infected with the virus (UNAIDS, 2009). Currently, up to 1.8 percent of the adult population in Papua New Guinea lives with the disease, and prevalence in urban areas may be as high as 3.5 percent (UNAIDS, 2009). New infections rates have increased about 30 percent a year since 1997. The first HIV infection in PNG was recorded in 1987, and by 2008 PNG accounted for 99 percent of reported HIV cases in the Pacific region (UNAIDS, 2009).

In 2006, the Australian government's Overseas Aid programme (AusAid) developed an epidemiological model to project the future course of the HIV epidemic in Papua New Guinea. The following outcomes were predicted:

- a generalised epidemic with over 500,000 people living with HIV
- HIV prevalence of over 10 percent of the adult population by 2025
- the workforce reduced by 12.5 per cent and GDP by 1.3 percent
- 300,000 adult deaths by 2025
- 70 percent of medical beds occupied by people living with HIV by 2025

(AusAid, 2006)

In June 2009, Prasado Rao, former head of the United Nations programme for AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, stated that Papua New Guinea was not able to deal with current infection rates, let alone predicted ones. He was speaking at an international AIDS conference in Indonesia, and stressed that Papua New Guinea was of real concern to the whole region.

Apart from increasing infections, the most challenging thing to me is the PNG scenario where much of the health system is in a state of collapse. So outside the capital, Port Moresby I don't think we can even think of a health system that really delivers services. (Rao, 2009)

In fact, health outcomes in PNG have improved little over the last 30 years, and in 2010 Papua New Guinea's health system struggles to meet the expanding health demands of a growing nation. A 2007 World Bank report titled, *Strategic Directions for Human Development in Papua New Guinea*, painted a grim scenario: a population of more than 5.5 million growing at 2.7 percent per annum; 40 percent of people living on less than \$1 a day; life expectancy at 59 years, and only 40 percent of the population with access to safe water. Alarmingly, infectious diseases such as HIV were described as the leading cause of death in the capital's main hospital (World Bank, 2007).

The risk factors associated with HIV outbreaks in PNG include a combination of ignorance and denial: low condom use, increasing migration and widespread incidents of domestic violence. These factors are further aggravated by inadequate health and counselling facilities, as well as poor access to antiretroviral drugs that slow the spread of the disease in infected individuals. In 2007 such concerns were raised by the HIV project director of the Lowry Institute for International Policy, Brett Bowtell: ‘HIV spreads first where there’s social dislocation, poverty and high numbers of young people, which pretty much describes most of the Pacific’ (Bowtell, 2007).

What worries health experts about the current generalised HIV/AIDS epidemic in PNG is that certain sexual behavioural practices remain widespread. A survey conducted by the Medical School at the University of PNG in 2005 on sexual behaviour and the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases revealed these disturbing findings.

We believe that 45-55 per cent of PNG men in the sexually active age range of 19-45 are having sex with more than one partner, possibly multiple partners. And it’s the combination of multiple sex partners and the increasing prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that puts Papua New Guineans most at risk of a devastating social catastrophe... These are not nightmare stories designed to frighten people. These are medical facts of an epidemic already deeply entrenched in our society (Sapuri, 2005)

The 2009 UNAIDS Epidemic Update stated that fewer than half the young people surveyed in PNG reported using a condom during their last sexual encounter. Former director of PNG’s National AIDS Council Secretariat (NACS), Dr Ninkama Moiya, worries that efforts to lessen infection rates could fail:

Getting the message across to people is not a problem, but it is changing attitudes and behaviour that is the issue. People know AIDS has no cure but still continue to have sex without a condom... We can say and do all we want, but if people at the individual level can’t respond positively to prevent HIV, all we’ve done will count for nothing. (Moiya, 2008)

Given the extent of this epidemic in PNG and the enormous impact it has on life in this country, the media coverage—or lack thereof—is something that needs to be monitored in order to ascertain how well the population is be-

ing kept informed of the progress of the virus, the methods of transmission and preventative measures. This article tracks both the extent and the type of press coverage from the two largest papers in Papua New Guinea over a period of ten years, and identifies a clear shift in reporting towards better explanation of the disease in the context of broader social and cultural issues. This is important as it indicates not only the evolution of HIV and AIDS reporting within this nation, but also highlights a strategy that may offer an example to other nations tackling this epidemic.

In this article, the acronym HIV is used to include those living with HIV, and also those living with AIDS, which is the next stage of the disease, when the human immune system breaks down. The term 'media' refers primarily to the print journalists.

Challenges for journalists when reporting HIV

Reporting on HIV presents several challenges for journalists in PNG, the first of which is to find an appropriate response while working within organisational constraints. The reality in the newsroom is that coverage of the disease has to compete with many other issues. In recent years, under traditional newsgathering routines and standards, journalists have failed to persuade their editors to run HIV stories (Brodie, Hamel, Kates, Altman, & Drew, 2004). Editors, for their part, do not want to be seen as merely relaying public health information. Moreover, there is a feeling that 'HIV fatigue' has set in, where readers are saturated with narratives of infection, suffering and death.

Ratzan (1993) argued in his book on effective health communications that despite differing views on the precise role of the media in reporting HIV, there is broad agreement on the fact that the media are an important and influential source of health and medical information, and that they shape public understandings of and responses to current epidemics. 'The media have enormous potential to help stop the spread of AIDS if they could inform the public continuously and accurately about the true nature and scope of HIV risks around the world' (Ratzan, 1993, p. 256). He stressed in the early 1990s that journalists should rise above the epidemic of complacency, stigma, and denial to uncover solutions for slowing HIV infection in the most devastated areas of the world. 'Effective health communication is our primary and most potent weapon in preventing the spread of AIDS. Until a vaccine or cure for

HIV infection is discovered, communication is all we have' (Ratzan, 1993, p. 257). This insight is still relevant today, especially since scientists are no nearer to finding a vaccine or a cure for the disease.

A decade later, Swain (2005) followed a similar line as Ratzan, arguing that the media, particularly journalists, exercise a significant influence, and that much of society's understanding of the disease, including who it affects and its future possibilities, comes from the media (Swain, 2005, p. 258). However, this is contested; some stress that the role of the press in reporting HIV/AIDS is still unclear and limited, and that better information and education on HIV equals improved health outcomes is problematic. Thus, the matter is far from settled.

Turning the focus back to PNG—perhaps the advice offered in 2002 by former PNG editor, Anna Solomon, whose reporting career in PNG spanned more than thirty years, is still relevant. She claimed: 'AIDS is boring to report—so let's try to make it interesting' (Solomon, 2002). In keeping with this exhortation, journalists could report on issues that are closely linked to the disease. For example, initially the global epidemic of HIV was seen as a crisis in public health. This is now generally seen as too simplistic and much interest has been generated by reflecting on the complex social, cultural and economic determinants and consequences of the epidemic.

Another slant on the topic has been derived from scholarly analysis of the content of HIV reporting such as in the United States (Kaiser, 2003), in Southern Africa (Panos, 2004), and in parts of Asia (International Federation of Journalists, IJR, 2006). There was broad agreement in all three studies that the language and tone of HIV stories from the mid-1990s onwards showed greater sensitivity to people living with HIV. It seems that editors and journalists were encouraged to amplify the voices of those infected by the disease and to increasingly report HIV as a story with medical, political, social, economic, cultural and religious aspects. So how did newspaper journalists in Papua New Guinea's two national newspapers report on HIV during the period 2000 to 2010?

Methodology

In health communication research, the most favoured methodology used to document media representations of disease has generally adopted a quantitative approach. This longitudinal study, however, opts for both a quantitative

and qualitative analysis of HIV stories in PNG's two national daily newspapers, *The National* and *Post-Courier* from January to March 2000 and from January to March 2010. Also, a similar content analysis was undertaken in 2005 but the time span was shorter due to difficulties in assessing information from the websites of both newspapers. The 2005 study analysed all news items on HIV in both newspapers during the middle week of each month: 10-14 January, 10-14 February and 14-18 March (Cullen, 2005).

Data collection for the 2000, 2005 and 2010 studies included all news items on HIV, and content analysis involved identifying each newspaper cutting on HIV as:

- an editorial,
- a letter,
- a local story,
- a foreign story,
- a front-page story
- or a feature.

In the category section, 'foreign story' refers to news items about HIV in foreign countries while 'local story' refers to news items on HIV within PNG. 'Harms' refer to a news story that describes the consequences of contracting HIV, namely sickness, stigma and death. MI stands for Mobilising Information and refers to stories that contain information about how to prevent infection. PLWA is the acronym for people living with AIDS. These categories followed closely those chosen by Kasoma (1995) and Pitt and Jackson (1993) when these researchers analysed press coverage of HIV/AIDS in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The analysis of the data is framed by two questions: Did coverage of the disease increase over the years and did the topics change and or remain the same?

One major reason for the focus on press reports of HIV/AIDS rather than a wider study on media coverage of the disease is due, in a large part, to having better access to archival print data. Print copy was easier to locate and avoids the long arduous task of trawling through broadcast tapes of the 1980s and 1990s when transcripts were not readily available. Also, 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. Moreover, the press can keep issues and debates in

the public forum and move items onto and up the political agenda (Conley & Lambie, 2006, p. 27).

Papua New Guinea’s two daily national newspapers were selected for this study: the *Post-Courier*, which started in 1969 and was until mid-2007, the largest-selling South Pacific daily with a circulation of 27,460. *The National* began operating in late 1993 and in 2009 it had a circulation of 37,291.

Summary of findings

The most significant finding was the rise in coverage over the period studied, with the total number of stories published in 2010 representing a 350 per cent increase on the number published over the same time frame in 2000 (Table 1). While the 2005 figures are unable to offer a suitable comparison, as it was only possible to obtain data for one week in each of the three months, it can be seen that even in that very limited period, the number of published stories (31) outstripped those in the entire three-month span in 2000 (25).

Table 1: Post-Courier and The National: News items on HIV

Year	Front page		Editorial		Feature		Local news story		Foreign news story		Letter		Total articles	
	P-C	N	P-C	N	P-C	N	P-C	N	P-C	N	P-C	N	P-C	N
2000	2	3	1	0	0	0	6	7	2	4	1	1	12	13
2005 ²	1	1	1	0	0	0	9	13	1	2	2	1	14	17
2010	2	1	1	5	8	0	48	25	0	0	0	2	59	33

Note: Type and number of news items.

¹ Front page stories were not included in the local or foreign news tallies.

² Due to the technical difficulties in accessing information from The National and the Post-Courier websites in 2005, it was only possible to take samples in three weeks (one in each of the three months) on 10-14 January; 14-18 February and 14 -18 March

This speaks not only to the growing importance of HIV as an issue in the nation over this time, but also to the willingness of the newspapers to cover the issue with increased regularity. Table 1 also reveals the increase in coverage was not identical; *The National* increased its coverage by 250 percent between 2000 and 2010, while the *Post-Courier* saw a 490 percent increase in that time.

The type of article published did not change significantly in the early studies. A comparison of the 2000 and 2005 studies of press coverage of HIV in PNG revealed that in neither year was a feature article published in the two daily newspapers (Table 1), and the topics did not change (Table 2). Between

2000 and 2005 the reporting of workshops, the latest figures for HIV/AIDS and ‘harms’ scored the largest number of stories. Differences did emerge in the 2005 study with new attempts to humanise the story. This resulted in four stories on people living with AIDS (PLWA) and four human-interest stories about people caring for those living with the disease. News items on prevention and protection, however, were not reported in the 2005 study and only one such item appeared in the 2000 study (Cullen, 2000, p.70). One significant finding was that none of the news items in the 2000 and 2005 studies contained any direct educational messages about ways to prevent infection. This is surprising as the number of HIV infections in PNG continued to show

Table 2: Post-Courier and The National, HIV topics

	Post-Courier				The National				Grand Total	
	2000	2005	2010	Total	2000	2005	2010	Total	Number	Percent
Figures	5	4	6	15	9	3	7	19	53	20.6
Workshops	3	3	11	17	6	3	5	14	45	17.5
Harms	8	2	8	18	8	4	5	17	52	20.2
Cures	1	1	5	7	1	2	3	6	19	7.4
MI	3	0	10	13	4	0	5	9	31	12.1
PWA	2	2	6	10	2	2	4	8	26	10.1
Human Interest	1	1	13	15	1	3	4	8	31	12.1
Total	23	13	59	95	31	17	33	81	257	100.0

significant increases in all 20 provinces. Also, infection rates were predicted to reach Sub-Saharan African proportions in a few years (Piot, 2005).

Content analysis of all HIV news items in the *Post-Courier* and *The National* from January to March 2010 revealed some significant changes in comparison to the 2000 and 2005 studies. As discussed, there were far more stories in the 2010 study—92 news items on HIV (compared to 25 in 2000 and 31 in 2005), which indicates that the disease was still considered newsworthy. There were 73 news stories, together with eight feature stories, six editorials, and three front-page stories.

Moreover, six out of the eight feature stories contained preventive messages. This was not the case with the 2000 and 2005 studies when there were fewer news or feature stories and no preventative or educational content in any of the news items. To sum up: there was a shift towards the

inclusion of more educational content in the feature stories, implying that both information and educational content are an essential part of reporting the story, regardless of their impact on reducing the rate of HIV infections. Other significant developments include: the inclusion of 15 stories with mobilizing information (there were none in the 2005 study), and in nearly all the feature articles there was much greater acceptance of people living with HIV, including transgender and homosexual people, indicating that the disease was becoming more accepted. And in the 2010 study, stories allocated to people living with AIDS had increased, and stories about funding and workshops had decreased compared to previous years.

Not all the HIV coverage could be considered as promoting greater understanding and awareness of the disease—at least in the form that public health advocates might support. In February 2010, an editorial published by *The National* criticised the widespread promotion and availability of condoms, arguing that, ‘The condom, rather than contain the rampaging march of HIV and AIDS, seems to be promoting promiscuity,’ (Condoms promote promiscuity, February 5, *The National*). This provocative piece was followed by considerable debate in both newspapers on the issue, with opposing perspectives offered by letter writers, the Catholic Church and the head of the National Aids Council in PNG. Although the initial article undermined the public health message, it induced a very public discussion about the various methods of avoiding infection and the riskiness of promiscuity.

Another interesting trend in the coverage was the recognition of the social stigma surrounding people with HIV in PNG. Several articles coded PLWA made it clear that the person described with the disease was not at fault. One notable article in the *Post-Courier* described the road to infection of a 29-year-old woman from Balimo who became the second wife of a ‘well-built man who was a land-owner’ from the region. It was only after her husband began losing weight rapidly that she discovered he had been diagnosed with HIV some time earlier; but he had not disclosed it. The article directly addressed the societal pressure both for her to remain with her husband and to hide the disease:

She went back to her family and they are supportive in the situation and want to help raise (her HIV-infected daughter) who is four years old. She said she disclosed her status to the community and to date had not suffered stigma. The community is supportive and I believe that is due

to ongoing awareness of the virus, she said. (Sad tale but true in PNG, *Post-Courier*, 25 March 2010)

Other articles addressed the stigma associated with key at-risk groups, including homosexual and transgender individuals, reporting moves to encourage greater acceptance, while simultaneously applying social pressure and advocating sanctions against those who wilfully spread the disease. This is clearly seen in an editorial in *The National* calling for tougher laws to stop actions, such as those of a 26-year-old Siassi Island man who knowingly infected a number of women.

The HIV/AIDS law is far too lenient on this kind of crime. The Act was drafted, it would appear, with the intention of protecting HIV carriers and AIDS sufferers against discrimination, forced testing and unauthorised disclosure. It is too lenient on people in Senet's shoes who have gone around wilfully infecting innocent people. Yet we have heard of far too many stories which are similar to Senet's. There was the woman in Manus, who while dying on a sick bed, announced that scores of men would follow her because she had given the virus to them. There was the man who, knowing he had the virus, picked up K20,000 from the NCD and spent it on hire cars and women all up and down the Waghi Valley. Many more such stories abound. (*You do the crime, you pay the time*, January 29, 2010, *The National*)

From a public health perspective, these positive developments are laudatory; however, the nature of HIV coverage clearly needs to vary in order to be sustained by newspapers—writing the same message, however worthy, loses impact over time. Perhaps the most interesting innovation in the 2010 coverage is the publication of a serialised fiction story in *The Post-Courier*, using a vehicle for messages and education effectively. It is the story of Vavine, a young girl infected with HIV, who is forced to leave her village after her parents' deaths from AIDS. She keeps her infection secret but because of her circumstances, she is forced to work in a club where sex is freely traded. What makes the story an educational tool, rather than soap opera, is the constant reinforcement of the safe-sex message and exploration of other social issues, including sorcery, beliefs surrounding magic and death, and promiscuity. Take, for example, this passage in which Vavine considers what might happen to her if the club owner finds out her infected status:

Vavine thought about her HIV status. But she knew Dennis wasn't aware of it and there was no way she was going to volunteer that information. Who knows what he'll do to me if he finds out, she thought. Many people in PNG didn't care about or truly comprehend how dangerous certain behaviours could be. The message that unsafe sexual activities could literally kill you was being ignored by a great deal of the population, mainly the uneducated. This was another reason AIDS was tightening its deadly grip on Papua New Guinea —countless people simply didn't understand the disease and how it was spread. (Vavine is assaulted, *Post-Courier*; 12 January 2010).

From the perspective of Australian print media, this may be a dubious method of promoting a message: however, it fits well with the established tradition of using popular culture such as television or serialised stories to deliver and clarify health messages. The trend to widen coverage of HIV in PNG began some years earlier, as revealed in a study by Cullen (2007) who analysed all online news items on HIV from the websites of the *Post-Courier* and *The National* during a three-month period from September to November 2007. Surprisingly, while stories on HIV were similar in content to those found in Cullen's 2000 and 2005 study on press coverage of HIV in PNG, there was a new focus on domestic violence in 2007 with both daily newspapers running 10 items each on the topic in October 2007. *The National* ran four editorials, three front-page stories and three new stories while the *Post-Courier* included two editorials, one front-page story, one in-depth feature and six news stories.

Domestic violence is a major social problem in PNG and an issue closely linked to HIV because it undermines the ability of PNG women to control their bodies and negotiate safe sexual practices. In November 2007, the *Post-Courier* wrote two editorials calling for an end to domestic violence and three news stories about a woman who suffered major burns after her husband set her alight. *The National* included three news items on the same incident and three news items on the rising number of rape cases in the country. While there is little research on press coverage of domestic violence in PNG, it could be argued that the emphasis on domestic violence in September, October and November 2007 in both newspapers represented a change in the reporting of HIV in PNG, and suggested journalists had started to link HIV with the wider social and cultural context of the disease.

Conclusion

This article presented the findings from an longitudinal case study on the reporting of HIV in PNG's two national newspapers, *The National* and *Post-Courier*, in 2000, 2005 and 2010 and tried to answer two questions: Did coverage of the disease decrease or increase over the years, and did the topics change and or remain the same? Although the data was limited, there was enough of it to provide some tentative answers to these questions. First, figures reveal that there was a gradual increase in news stories in all three studies. There were more in-depth educational feature articles, and the tone revealed a change in attitude among PNG journalists to report the disease with greater sensitivity towards people living with the disease and to include information about how to avoid infection. Overall, there was still a strong emphasis on reporting harms, infection rates and regional workshops. Journalists in PNG, however, did begin to widen coverage of the disease (Cullen, 2009, p. 157). Current and former editors and journalists from *the Post-Courier* and *The National* newspapers should be highly commended for consistently tracking and reporting the spread of the disease for the past decade. There is, however, room to expand the links to HIV and so cover the story more fully.

An understanding of some HIV communication theories may help journalists to broaden the current scope and content of HIV reporting in PNG. One theory in particular — Social Change Communication (SCC)—challenges the media to extend coverage of HIV from primarily a health story to one that is linked to social, economic, cultural and political factors. In contrast, Behaviour Change Communication theory (BCC) was found to be less effective because it was limited mainly to promoting the knowledge and skills of individuals without taking into account the wider social and economic contexts (Kippax, 2007). Nevertheless, both SCC and BCC theories challenge journalists to rethink their approach when reporting on HIV. One reason for this is that the BCC approach still continues to dominate both the clinical and social sciences and this is where journalists often seek expert views. Another reason is that SCC is difficult to implement in socially repressive environments where such stories could threaten the privilege of the status quo.

Many questions remain and a deeper consideration needs to be given to the role of journalism in health promotion/development contexts. The next stage of this research project is to undertake in-depth interviews with both journalists and editors of the newspapers in PNG to further explore their at-

titudes towards HIV coverage and news priorities in this area. It is expected that this will provide further detail not only about the motivations of news organisations in covering this topic but clarify the role that educators and other agencies can play in maintaining its presence in the news. For now, the most challenging aspect for editors and journalists in PNG (and elsewhere), especially where HIV is a serious public health threat, is to realise the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues linked to the HIV pandemic. In this way, the PNG experience of connecting reporting of the disease to broader social and cultural issues may serve as an example to other nations at an earlier stage of tackling this disease. Indeed, the relationship between the disease and these macro issues is almost universal: HIV is not merely a medical problem but operates like a magnifying glass that magnifies the exploitation of women, domestic violence, gender inequality, illiteracy, the lack of health facilities and the kind of rampant poverty that forces people to migrate. The connectivity of these issues has important implications for political and financial reporters, editorial page writers, television producers and radio journalists.

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