

The Perception of the HIV and AIDS Pandemic by the Nigerian Press

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ABSTRACT This study assessed the perception by the Nigerian press of the severity of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The assessment was based on the coverage of HIV and AIDS issues by selected newspapers. Three variables were used for examining editorial matter in selected newspapers: *Scope* was used to define the extent of coverage of HIV and AIDS issues as a percentage of total editorial content; *genre* was to establish whether published matter was news, opinion, feature, and so on, while *trend* was to establish whether the press did more or less over time in covering the pandemic. Six national dailies were examined over a five-year period. The study covered three time frames, June 2005, June 2008 and June 2010. The data suggest that the press has severely underestimated the severity of the pandemic. The newspapers devoted only 0.35% of all editorial matter they published to HIV or AIDS. More dramatically, overall coverage declined 94% between 2005 and 2010. The implication is that if the press reflects the society, the public has underestimated the severity of AIDS and HIV. Thus, it may be hypothesized that *the longer a public health crisis lingers, the farther its severity recedes from the public mind.*

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of AIDS when there was little general knowledge of the enormity of what was confronting humanity, there was a tendency to think of it as a “fad”, some strange ailment that would pass with time. Apartheid South Africa reflected most aptly the wishful-thinking mentality originally associated with the advent of the scourge. According to Patterson (2006), “The apartheid state assured white South Africans the disease was confined to ‘deviant homosexuals’ or poor black migrants from neighbouring countries.” In Kenya, medical officials credited the first four deaths from AIDS to skin cancer (Patterson 2006). The first two HIV cases in Nigeria were identified in 1985 and were reported at an international AIDS conference in 1986. Though the Nigerian health sector established the first National AIDS Advisory Committee in 1987, it was not until “much later before the government, the public and international agencies began seriously to address the emergent epidemic” (Smith 2004).

However, by 2005, the reality of the HIV and AIDS pandemic had become entrenched in the public mind. AIDS statistics showed very clearly that social conditions in Africa guaranteed an uncontrollable spread of the most defiant health problem of the 20th and 21st centuries. By that year, according to UNAIDS, 3.6 million Nigerians were estimated to be living with AIDS, “a

prevalence rate of 5.4 percent, compared with 7.5 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 1.1 percent globally” (UNAIDS 2007). Today, data show some decline in the figures. UNAIDS (2010) sources put the number living with HIV and AIDS at 2.6 million; NACA put the figure as of 2009 at 2.98 million (male 1.38 million; female 1.61 million). NACA (2010) put the national prevalence rate in 2005 at 4.4 percent and 4.6 in 2009; AVERT, an AIDS charity, says the prevalence rate is “around 3.1 percent of adults between the ages 15 and 49 living with HIV and AIDS in the country.” But the agency has often called attention to the more realistic position that the national prevalence rate masks great diversity in the epidemic at the state level: “The epidemic can be generalized in higher prevalence states and concentrated in other states, affecting different populations in both urban and rural settings...varying between 10.5 percent in some states and 2 percent in others” (NACA 2010).

However, the most up-to-date and comprehensive authoritative source, the UNGASS 2010 Report, provides the following picture of HIV and AIDS in the country:

Nigeria’s HIV prevalence is estimated at 3.6% (NARHS 2007) which is a population-based survey. Antenatal sentinel survey has been used to monitor the trend of the epidemic over time. In 2008, the prevalence among the pregnant women was 4.6% which could be considered a progress from 5.8% in 2001.

Despite that, more interventions are needed to limit the spread of HIV in Nigeria. Current estimates by the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) indicate that 2.98 million people are living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria in 2009 with a total AIDS death of 192,000. One of the most remarkable social and economic impacts of HIV/AIDS is the ever increasing number of AIDS orphans which was estimated at 2.12 million in 2008 and 2.175 million in 2009. Despite the national prevalence of 4.6%, there are several variations by state and local government area. At the zonal level, prevalence is lowest in the South West (2.0%) and highest in the South-South (7.0%). Age group specific prevalence is highest in the age group 25-29 years (5.6%) and lowest in the 40-44 years age group (2.9%), according to the 2008 ANC survey.

Indeed, the cited annual death rate of 192,000 from AIDS is, in all probability, an understatement; the true picture is likely to be much worse. Nigeria is a vast territory of 923,768 square kilometers (356,669 square miles), a little smaller than one-fourth of the European Union or Texas and California in the US put together. About 66 - 70 percent of the population of 150 million lives in the rural areas where both deaths and births are generally under-reported, where medical services are practically non-existent and living conditions and nutrition standards produce a fertile environment for infectious diseases.

In the wake of AIDS, though certainly not solely because of it, Nigeria's life expectancy has declined. The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that in 1991 the average life expectancy was 53.8 years for women and 52.6 years for men. By 2007 these figures fell to 46 for women and 47 for men (WHO 2008). The Human Development Report 2009 indicates life expectancy as 47.7 (UNDP 2010). As AVERT (2010) surmises, "Despite being the largest oil producer in Africa and the 12th largest in the world, Nigeria is ranked 158 out of 177 on the UNDP Human Poverty Index...The poverty of the majority means that Nigeria is faced with huge challenges in fighting its HIV AND AIDS epidemic."

Some authorities have suggested that the most available data are far from reliable because of the size of the country, inadequate monitoring capacity and the low level of literacy in the

rural areas where the disease might thrive most. For example, Smith (2004) noted that the "lack of reliable data perhaps contributes to both official and popular neglect of the potential magnitude of the public health, social, economic and political implications of the epidemic" (p. 201). The inadequacy of data has eased dramatically in the last five years or so. For example, the UNGASS 2010 Report has tapped from the most authoritative official and voluntary agencies sources: NACA, UNAIDS, Line Ministries and Civil Society groups, several units of the Federal Ministry of Health such as National HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infection Control Programme and Blood Bank, as well as the Federal Ministry of Education.

UNGASS said it also reviewed various published reports such as ANC 2008, NARHS 2007, IBBSS 2007 and NDHS 2008. In addition, secondary data analysis was done with the ANC 2008, NARHS 2007 and IBBSS 2007 survey data to obtain survey related indicators and disaggregation. Literature review was done to strengthen the quality of the reports with published articles. Similarly, 18 National Composite Policy Index (NCPI) questionnaires were administered to organizations/institutions (nine government institutions and nine nongovernment institutions involving non-governmental organizations, UN organizations, bilateral agencies and civil society groups). According to the UNGASS Report, the questionnaires were administered to the HIV/AIDS focal persons in these agencies and organizations. This is, therefore, undoubtedly a great resource for the most comprehensive data on the HIV/AIDS conundrum in the country.

From the understated data to the most comprehensive, the picture that emerges is still a gloomy one. Smith (2004) cited a study (Panchaud et al. 2002) which projected that "in the next 10 - 15 years, Nigeria will have the largest number of people living with HIV and AIDS of any country in Africa." Fortunately, the projection has not materialized. According to UNGASS (2010), "HIV epidemic rose from 1.8% in 1991 and peaked at 5.8% in 2001. Subsequently, the trend reversed and took a downward turn from 5.8% to 5% in 2003 and then to 4.4% in 2005, although a slight increase was observed in HIV prevalence from 4.4% in 2005 to 4.6% in 2008 (Federal Ministry of Health 2010). That puts the current prevalence rate at 4.6 percent, better than the situation in South

Africa with a smaller population. Current figures indicate a reduction in prevalence rate to 4.1 percent (Diala et al. 2011). Still, that is cold comfort.

From all perspectives, then, it is imperative to continue to build and sustain awareness of HIV and AIDS as well as awareness of their complexities, complications and socio-economic implications. This will help in the continuous expansion of the knowledge base of the Nigerian population about the scourge. The role of the mass media in this endeavour is incontrovertible and provided the motive for this study. The study focused specifically on the daily press and their perception of the severity of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and, therefore, their role in raising the level of public awareness of the pandemic.

Mass Media, HIV and AIDS and Public Awareness

It is evident that the mass media are indispensable in the march of civilisation. As Allen (1977) asserts, mass communication is identical and basic to the meaning of mass society. He noted that “modern society does not only depend upon mass communication, but the process itself defines the nature of mass society.” In the age of media convergence, the mass media more than ever remain a critical factor in the development of modern large-scale communities. The potentials for greater media access represented by Internet-based platforms and new communication technologies mean that more and more citizens will depend on the media for much of what they know. In a few words, the weighty issues of the 21st century would be impossible to communicate without the mass media.

HIV and AIDS qualify to be listed among those weighty issues. Indeed, UNAIDS has noted that, “a sweeping new UNAIDS and Zogby International public opinion poll shows that nearly 30 years into the AIDS epidemic, region by region, countries continue to rank AIDS high on the list of the most important issues facing the world” (UNAIDS 2010). HIV or AIDS is so pervasive and yet so personal that it would be impossible to spread awareness and knowledge of it without the mass media. But the effectiveness of the media for purposes of public campaigns – including health campaigns

- varies in proportion to their commitment to undertake any specific task.

Nigeria’s media environment requires some elaboration here. The broadcast media systems are impressive by African standards. Radio and television have expanded tremendously in the last 15 years. There are at present 100 radio stations, 147 television stations, 35 cable stations, and five direct-to-home and four direct broadcast satellite (DBS) stations on air at the moment (National Broadcasting Commission 2010). The combined use of these resources holds a lot of promise for the kind of public health campaign demands presented by HIV and AIDS. AVERT observes: “As Nigeria is such a large and diverse country, media campaigns to raise awareness of HIV are a practical way of reaching many people in different regions.” (AVERT 2010). The AIDS charity reported that:

Radio campaigns like the one created by the Society for Family Health are thought to have been successful in increasing knowledge and changing behaviour. “Future Dreams” was a radio serial broadcast in 2001 in nine (Nigerian) languages on 42 radio channels. It focused on encouraging consistent condom use, increasing knowledge and increasing skills for condom negotiation in single men and women aged between 18 and 34 (AVERT 2010).

Radio has great advantages as a medium of mass communication. Many scholars agree that radio helps people scale not just the literacy barrier but also physical barriers. Rogers (2003) noted that “today in the new millennium, radio is still the most important medium for reaching mass audiences in many poor nations.” A 2006 research by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) re-affirmed that radio is the most accessible and the most consumed media in all the countries surveyed. “Radio dominates the mass media spectrum with state-controlled radio services still commanding the biggest audiences in most countries but regional (within country) commercial stations demonstrating the largest consistent increases in numbers...” (BBC World Service Trust 2006). The report lists Nigeria as a “medium listening” country, with weekly reach figures of 70 percent – 90 percent.

But radio also has the disadvantage of being aural and, therefore, ephemeral. The consumer of radio has to be there to receive what is given. That becomes a big problem in most of rural Nigeria and indeed the urban areas where the

people are highly mobile – farmers, merchandisers, small-scale and itinerant traders, and fishermen.

TV as a medium is generally more attuned to the elite and urban dwellers. Technically, without networking or satellite or cable connections, its signals reach is limited. In addition, in Nigeria where power outages are a perennial problem, TV sets are quite often mere living room furniture for the lower middle class. The high cost of a TV set may also militate against its mass usage (Okunna 1994; Salama 1989). However, it should be added here that the presence of television in the rural areas of Nigeria is not as rare a phenomenon as it once was. Primary and secondary school teachers, retired civil servants and even retired university teachers who have retreated to the country's quieter rural environment have taken television with them. The BBC-led research cited earlier put TV ownership in Nigeria at 52.5 percent of the population. Among the urban poor and rural dwellers, access to TV has a uniquely Nigerian character, where as many as 20 – 30 people can cluster round one TV set and experience even more excitement than those who watch it in the comfort of family living rooms. Not surprisingly, the BBC report put access to television in the country at 74 percent, with 52.3 percent of the population watching TV at least once a week. This and its audio-visual character give television enormous advantages in any major public health campaign. As Madhu et al. (2009) point out: "Well researched television content can create public awareness about HIV prevention, treatment, care and support can potentially influence the development and implementation of relevant policies."

Also, the rising profile of private broadcast media in the country - 15 television and 27 radio stations (NBC 2010) - is good for a country faced with grave health issues that need to reach the largest segment of the population. These private outlets do offer the audiences different perspectives in programming and the issues they cover. They provide expanded platforms for carrying HIV and AIDS messages.

Newspapers and magazines also have the problem of being accessible to only those who can read. Though newspaper circulation data are difficult to access in the country, the newspaper has unique advantages in any efforts to reach a wide spectrum of the Nigerian population with HIV and AIDS information.

The use of new media to raise awareness has been boosted by the surge of mobile phone usage across Africa, which is said to have the world's fastest growth, with penetration soaring from just one in 50 people at the turn of the century to 28%. Nigeria, with 75 million subscribers (ITU 2010), has enjoyed a mobile phone use surge commensurate with its size and, as far back as 2005, UNICEF tapped into the mobile phone revolution to send SMS texts to 9 million Nigerian youths in the campaign to raise their awareness about HIV and AIDS (BBC 2005). With internet access also reaching 43.9 million (ITU 2010), the prospects and paraphernalia for spreading health issue messages continue to expand. With Generations X and Y dominating the social media environment, the picture, in terms of reach towards the more vulnerable groups in the HIV and AIDS conundrum, is less bleak than it was just five years ago.

These strengths and weaknesses of the various media of public communication provide a compelling, professional argument for using a combination of the media in the fight against HIV and AIDS. To wit, using broadcast, print, new and traditional media in combination holds greater prospects of success for any well-articulated public health campaign. However, this study focused on the role of the newspaper in such a media mix.

In this kind of strategy, the newspaper has specific advantages. In their surveillance function, newspapers have more capacity for depth of coverage than the other media, except perhaps the internet. Newspapers can present various perspectives to an event or issue over time and with considerable space. In the Digital Age, most Nigerian newspapers are also online, thus strengthening the print newspaper in its surveillance role.

Newspapers are also crucial in the interpretation of events for the reader. Interpretation helps to sift the deluge of information available to the population from day to day. In addition, they provide perspectives that give meaning and significance to events reported or filtered into the public domain. Unarguably, newspapers are among the best media of mass communication in performing this function because of the greater space available to them. Thus, they are able to present "articles, often labeled 'news analysis,' (which) appear alongside straight news sto-

ries and try to explain the implications and possible consequences of certain events” (Wilson 1993).

The newspaper also has the advantage of being “hard copy.” People have the tendency to hold and physically feel things. As Neher (2003) rightly observed, “newspapers are tangible objects that can be passed around and read aloud to families and other groups, so circulation figures may understate their influence.” This translates into several advantages for the newspaper medium.

- It can be preserved
- It can be revisited, read over and over
- Facts and issues can be rechecked
- It can be passed on
- There are parts of Nigeria where readers pay street vendors a little money to scan or read newspapers on the newsstand if they cannot afford to buy a copy.

In other words, in spite of the information available to the public on radio, TV and, increasingly, on new media, readers still buy newspapers not only in order to have greater details of events, but also to have some form of permanent record of the events. This is why, in times of prominent national events such as presidential speeches, budget announcements, change of governments or ministerial appointees and coups d’état during the military interregnums, newspaper circulation would go up.

Despite limited circulation (compared with the mass circulation tabloids of Europe, North America and Japan), the papers at least reach many of those in policy making positions, opinion leaders and urban residents (which include those in the 774 Local Government headquarters) with their varied contents. In addition, Nigeria’s media culture is embedded in the printed press, which dates back to 1859 with the founding in Abeokuta of *Iwe Irohin*, a bilingual fortnightly, recorded as the country’s first regular newspaper. Between then and 1932 (when the British Empire Service radio was extended to the country), newspapers thrived in numbers – though not in longevity – providing the only media outlets with which the citizens could personally identify. As a consequence, the average Nigerian tends to trust the newspaper more than the broadcast media that are still dominated by governments.

This is the background for this study, which sought to assess how the Nigerian press per-

ceives the severity of HIV and AIDS pandemic, using the contents of six national dailies.

Research Questions

Three basic research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What was the scope of HIV and AIDS coverage in the selected newspapers?

RQ2: What was the dominant genre of what was published?

RQ3: What was the trend of coverage over time?

Three variables were established for examining the study population, namely, *scope*, *genre* and *trend*. *Scope* was defined as the extent of coverage of HIV and AIDS issues as a percentage of total editorial content; *genre* was used to identify the communicative form of presentation – whether the editorial matter was news, opinion, features, photographs or cartoons, while *trend* was used to establish whether the press was doing more or less over time in publishing HIV and AIDS issues. This was considered important because the mass media provide the main sources from which a substantial portion of the population draw their knowledge and information on AIDS and other diseases that plague the people. Thus, in studying how much coverage the newspapers gave to HIV and AIDS, the researcher also sought to find out in what form the information was presented.

RESEARCH METHOD

This was a simple descriptive content study, defined by the basic goal of the research. The study relied on the coverage of HIV and AIDS by the selected newspapers to assess how the Nigerian press perceives the severity of the pandemic. As Babbie (1997) observed, content analysis enables a researcher to learn “about human behaviour by observing what people inadvertently leave behind them” particularly in documents.

Descriptive content analysis often appears to be too simple in the view of some scholars because it tends to centre on “manifest content.” Krippendorff (2004), for example, took issue with Berelson’s definition of content analysis because “by including the attribute ‘manifest’ in his definition, Berelson...literally excludes ‘reading between the line,’ which is what experts do, often with remarkable inter-subjective

agreement.” Of course, the point is well taken because there is a lot to be gained in studying latent meanings in texts. But, Riffe et al. (1998) stated the alternative view that, “simple description of content has its place in communication research.”

One of the ways to address the contentions with *descriptive* content analysis is “to draw inferences about meaning or infer from the communication to its context” (Riffe et al. 1998). Research Question 2 provided the framework for drawing such inferences and “conclusions about what was not observed based on what was observed,” (Riffe et al. 1998). The selected newspapers were, therefore, examined page by page to identify all editorial matter on HIV and AIDS. At the same time the number of other editorial items on the page was noted so as to be able to determine HIV/AIDS materials as a percentage of all editorial matter.

Study Period

Three time frames were established for the study: one month (June) in 2005, the same month in 2008, and the same month in 2010. The first time frame was chosen arbitrarily due to the fact that by 2005 the press would have reflected the re-orientation of the populace that HIV and AIDS were not a passing “fad”. The second and third time frames were selected on the assumption that there was a reasonable lapse of time between 2005 and 2008 and 2010 to present a comparative perspective. Two to three years were assumed to be a reasonable period for a trend to emerge, one way or another. In sum, the study spanned five years.

Thus, issues of *The Guardian*, the *New Nigerian* and *The Punch* were examined in the first time frame (June 2005); the same newspapers were examined in the second time frame (June 2008). In the third time frame, issues of *The Nation*, *Thisday*, and *Daily Trust* published in June 2010 were examined. The use of different newspapers for the 2010 analysis was to broaden the scope and enhance the external validity of the study even though this might raise the question of comparability. Note was, however, taken of the fact that these newspapers met the criteria used for selecting the three newspapers used for 2005 and 2008.

Also, for the purpose of this study the Saturday and Sunday editions of the newspapers were

included in the study period although these editions are usually treated as separate titles from the daily, with separate editors from those of the dailies. The use of titles *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *New Nigerian*, *The Nation*, *Thisday* and *Daily Trust* in the study was, therefore, for analytical convenience since these are the legal titles of the dailies.

Study Population

Establishing the population for this study involved multistage sampling. The universe of the study consisted of all 42 daily newspaper titles in Nigeria. From this population six newspapers were selected, using *circulation* as the major criterion. They were within the circulation range of 25, 000 – 200, 000, that is: *The Guardian*, *New Nigerian* and *Daily Trust* (25, 000 – 50, 000); *Thisday*, *The Nation*, and *The Punch* (100, 000 – 200, 000). (These figures were supplied by the media organisations. The circulation figure for *New Nigerian* was extracted from a report made to Nigeria’s Vice President Namadi Sambo by publishers of the paper, which is currently off the newsstands).

An additional criterion was *local coverage*. Though the selected newspapers are described as national newspapers in the country, some of them cover certain areas of the country with greater intensity. For example, before it went under, the *New Nigerian* covered the Northern parts of the country both intensively and extensively. Indeed, Galadima and Enighe (2001) have asserted that “the perception of the *New Nigerian* by the political class in the 19 northern Nigerian states was that of a political creation (that) represents the views and aspirations of the North.” In the national perception, *Daily Trust* has more than filled the vacuum left by the *New Nigerian*. Based in Abuja FCT and printed simultaneously in Kaduna, Abuja and Maiduguri, it is able to reach many distant places in Nigeria’s 19 northern states.

The Punch prides itself as the most widely read newspaper in the country; but it does have a South-West home base as well as proprietorship. Both *The Guardian* and *Thisday* are easily perceived as “national” newspapers but their proprietors are from the South-South geopolitical zone of the country. They also cover extensively the South-East geopolitical zone – which is contiguous with the South-South. *The Nation*

has made considerable inroads in its national circulation bid and sees itself in the “tabloid” mould and does cover “bad news” or “disaster news” avidly. (The country is divided into six geopolitical zones: North-West, North-East and North-Central; South-West, South-South and South-East – encompassing the 36 states. The Federal Capital Territory of Abuja is autonomous). There is a tendency among the country’s newspapers to skew their distribution to some parts of the country according to their spheres of interest.

All this was considered important in view of the nature of the research. One of the factors considered in HIV and AIDS statistics is *variations in the prevalence rate*; that is to say, looking beyond the overall picture to the incidence in specific areas of the country. For instance, within the national prevalence rate of 4.4 percent, the following state-level prevalence rates give a completely different picture of the scale of the problem: Benue (10%), Cross River (6.1%), Enugu (6.5%), Federal Capital Territory – FCT (6.3%), Kaduna (5.6%), and Nasarawa (6.7%) (NACA 2010). This suggested that in selecting the newspapers for study, as much of the country as possible should be encompassed. The six newspapers selected met these criteria and cover sections of the country extensively.

The small population of this study (270 editions) lent itself readily to a census rather than sampling. The usual worry about analysing the census of a population is that “it is...generally cost-prohibitive and may in fact confound the research” (Wimmer and Dominick 2000); that did not apply in this case. Riffe et al. (1998) conclude that “a census provides the most valid discussion of a population because it includes all units” (1998). Like Wimmer and Dominick, they argued that the decision whether a census is feasible depends on the resources and goals of individual research projects. The selected population was not too large to analyse.

The 270 issues produced by the six newspapers for the three periods were thus examined page by page by three coders to identify all published items on HIV and AIDS. The units of analysis (in this case equivalent to content units) were the published items. These were hard news stories, human interest stories (used to describe soft news), features, institutional editorials, opi-

nion articles, signed columns, letters to the editor, cartoons and pictures about HIV and AIDS. The coders were also trained to count the number of all editorial items published on each page by simply counting the headlines on the page. If a story, feature, opinion piece, etc., jumped from one page to another, the jumped head was counted as a separate item on that page.

Reliability

Because this study was concerned with simply counting all published materials on HIV and AIDS, the chances of coder disagreement were negligible. There was, therefore, no attempt to establish inter-coder reliability in terms of agreement on whether a publication was on HIV and AIDS. However, the coders used for this contents scan were final year students of Mass Communication. Since *genre* was one of the variables used in identifying HIV and AIDS editorial matter, the chances of disagreement existed in terms of classifying. For example, it was possible for there to be differences in perception of a soft news story (human interest) and a feature, even though every effort was made to define these as precisely as possible. For this reason, the human interest/feature classification was preferred in recording the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Krippendorff (2004) suggests that tables are attractive to researchers because they tend to simplify textual data. He characterises tabulations as “by far the most common technique used to render data comprehensible” because of the large volume of text that content analysts typically handle.” This is especially true for nominal level data. The data for this study are thus presented in tabular form.

The data suggest rather troubling indicators as is evident in answering the research questions.

RQ1: What Was the Scope of Coverage?

First of all, the scope of coverage was abysmal. Table 1 indicates that the three newspapers published only 63 editorial items (news items and human interest/feature articles) on HIV and AIDS in the 30-day period of June 2005. In 2008 (Table 2) they published 36 items (nine news stories, nine human interest/feature articles,

seven letters to the editor, and 11 opinion articles) on HIV and AIDS. In 2010, only two of the selected three newspapers published anything on HIV and AIDS, a paltry eight (8) editorial items: four (4) hard news stories and four (4) opinion articles (See Table 3).

Table 1: Frequency of editorial items on HIV and AIDS published by the newspaper in June 2005 (N = 63)

Genre of editorial matter	Newspapers			
	The Guardian	The Punch	New Nigerian	Total
Hard news	9	18	22	49 (78%)
Human interest/features	5	7	2	14 (22%)
Editorial comments	0	0	0	0
Editorial comments	0	0	0	0
Signed columns	0	0	0	0
Letters	0	0	0	0
Cartoons	0	0	0	0
Pictures	0	0	0	0
Total	14	25	24	63 (100%)

Table 2: Frequency of editorial items on HIV and AIDS published by the newspapers in June 2008 (N = 36)

Genre of editorial matter	Newspapers			
	The Guardian	The Punch	New Nigerian	Total
Hard news	3	3	3	9 (25%)
Human interest/features	1	8	8	9 (25%)
Editorial comments	0	0	0	0
Signed columns	0	0	0	0
Opinion articles	0	0	11	11 (31%)
Letters	0	0	7	7 (31%)
Cartoons	0	0	0	0
Pictures	0	0	0	0
Total	14	25	24	36 (100%)

Data from Table 4 show that the six papers published 30, 177 editorial items in the three time frames: 5, 897 in 2005 and 11, 249 in 2008, and 14, 031 in 2010. This means that in 2005, only 1.07% of all editorial items published in the three newspapers were on HIV or AIDS; 0.35

Table 3: Frequency of editorial items on HIV and AIDS published by the newspapers in June 2010 (N = 8)

Genre of editorial matter	Newspapers			
	The Guardian	The Punch	New Nigerian	Total
Hard news	0	3	1	4 (50%)
Human interest/features	0	0	0	0
Editorial comments	0	0	0	0
Signed columns	0	0	0	0
Opinion articles	0	0	4	4 (50%)
Letters	0	0	0	0
Cartoons	0	0	0	0
Pictures	0	0	0	0
Total	0	3	5	8 (100%)

in 2008 and 0.06 % in 2010. *Thisday* did not carry a single editorial item on HIV or AIDS. Yet it published a total of 4, 736 editorial items in the study period. Therefore, in percentage terms, HIV and AIDS occupied about 0.35% of total editorial space in the six newspapers in the three time frames.

Although there is a downward trend in the national prevalence rate (4.1%, according to Diala et al. 2011), these data suggest that the newspapers may misjudge the enormity of AIDS or are not convinced of the scale and severity of the problem and, therefore, place the coverage of the scourge lower down in their priorities. A major factor impeding progress in the struggle against AIDS in Africa is insufficient public information on the pandemic. Oko-Offoboché (n.d.) lists “lack of information and education” among the factors that have contributed to reproductive ill health among adolescents in Nigeria. She ranks this factor alongside “a long-established history of inequality and neglect of the young population and women, inappropriate health care services...poverty as well as lack of legislation and policies.”

The press is expected to be in the frontline of the struggle to upgrade that environment. It can do this by providing support for civil society, serving as a repository of current information

Table 4: Total editorial items published by the six newspapers over the three time frames (N = 30, 177)

Time frame	Newspapers						
	The Guardian	The Punch	New Nigerian	Thisday	The Nation	Daily Trust	Total
2005	2171	2213	1513	=	=	=	5897
2008	3896	3780	2573	=	=	=	10249
2010	=	=	=	4736	5146	4149	14031
Total	6067	5993	4086	4736	5146	4149	30177

about HIV and AIDS which can be tapped by the public and encouraging the governments in the areas of policy initiatives, investment in antiretroviral drugs, addition of new and better health facilities and in continuously enhancing awareness. Awareness needs cover a wide spectrum, including the social implications of HIV and AIDS such as stigmatization. It can provide information it gleans from the day-to-day struggles of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA), which could be useful to governments and organizations involved in the epic fight against disease.

The press cannot make this kind of contribution by allocating only 0.35 percent of its editorial space to reporting and commenting on HIV and AIDS. The issues the newspapers routinely covered and to which they devoted a lot of editorial space included fashion, sports, the home video/movie industry, crossword puzzles and games, politics, political cartoons, and so on. Of course, these are legitimate content areas for newspapers, designed to make them commercially viable. But a socially responsible newspaper wants to be a business success so it can serve as a vehicle for community and human development. At the present level of performance the press community is all but negligent of one of the greatest health challenges of our time and its negative impact on the country's development agenda.

In addition to the paucity of coverage, the news stories were short items, some as short as three paragraphs. A majority of them looked like *fillers* – stories used to fill space left over after placing major stories. Not surprisingly, the stories lacked depth and detail. As is characteristic of the average Nigerian newspaper story, they “leave more questions in the reader's mind at the end than at the beginning” (Anim 2006). Though the inquiry did not set out to study story placements – in terms of prominence – it was inevitable to observe that no HIV or AIDS story made either the front-page lead or indeed the front page.

Patterson (2006) asserted that institutions influence political responses to the pandemic and that “there is no one institutional design that has fostered political commitment to AIDS or led governments to positively develop AIDS policies.” The press should fit well into that role. The newspapers reach the policy makers and the political elite and should, therefore,

strive valiantly to drive state policy towards an increasingly sustainable confrontation with the AIDS pandemic. One of the functions assigned to the press by media theorists is agenda-setting. Essentially, the agenda-setting theory holds that there is “a correspondence between the order of importance given in the media to ‘issues’ and the order of significance attached to the same issues by politicians and the public” (McQuail 2005). The press plays a vital role in what gets elevated to the major issues of regular public discourse and debate.

RQ2: What Was the Dominant Genre of What Was Published? One way to remedy the tendency towards short, sketchy stories is to supplement straight news with a lot of features and soft news. But the data in this area suggested this was not the case. Table 1 shows that about 78% of the published items in 2005 were hard news stories; features and human interest stories made up only 22%. In 2008 (Table 2), hard news and features/human interest stories levelled at 25% each. The dominant genre was opinion articles at 31%, while the people's views (letters) contributed 19%. In 2010 (Table 3), apart from the abysmally poor showing in coverage, there were no features or soft new stories, just four hard news stories and four opinion articles.

Indeed, features were not widely used across the six newspapers. For example, the seven features entered for *The Punch* in 2005 were published in one Sunday issue which devoted the *Sunday magazine* section to stories of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). This is not to take away from the newspaper's efforts; it merely suggests that it could do more of that and more frequently too. So could the other newspapers.

In professional journalism, straight news and features perform different functions for the reading community. Feature stories, as Whitaker et al. (2000) observe, “... offer readers serious background information, give readers a closer, in-depth look at current events or trends, or present different perspectives on a news happening.” Then there is a variant of the feature form called the human interest story or soft news because it “particularly emphasizes human values and has sympathetic people as story subjects” (Whitaker et al. 2006). A human interest story especially considers what it means to deal with the defeats and victories, joys and sorrows

of the human condition. The relevance of this to coverage of HIV and AIDS should be obvious to any committed journalism community.

First, without in-depth reports and in the absence of insufficient number of features in the press, there is much information out there which cannot become public knowledge. UN Specialised agencies, AIDS charities, NGOs, bilateral and multilateral donors, national HIV and AIDS organisations and many more are providing information that could lead to better care – medically, logistically, financially, and psychologically for PLWHA if only such information became common knowledge – both to health care workers and the general public. Knowing that most African countries are ill-equipped to publish and massively distribute information on HIV and AIDS, these organisations have continued to produce literature that could be of great help to PLWHA. There are hundreds of such publications in response to specific problems as the battle against the scourge exposes the weaknesses of the ensuing battle plans. Sadly, many of such efforts may get to the local NGOs and state officials, but a more general circulation would enable the public to share the information and counsel they contain, bringing great benefit to the AIDS community. Newspapers are the best equipped to disseminate such knowledge.

Second, a critical problem with any pandemic, which is often generally ignored by the Nigerian press, is the social implications. As one American reporter involved in the coverage of AIDS noted, “The disease is one story; the social context of the story becomes another story. If you ignore the opportunity to deal with the social revulsion, you miss the whole crux” (Rich 2003). In other words, the media should deliberately cultivate the option of writing stories that bring alive the people living with HIV and AIDS, stories that enable the readers to visualise the lives of those they sometimes treat as untouchables, and help them (the readers), on the basis of better knowledge and information, to realise that those “untouchables” are, after all, just neighbours, friends or family folks who happen to be overtaken with a certain disease.

Good human interest features are people-centred and readers like to read them because “they tell about people who are dealing with loss: of health, money, of a loved one, of life”

(Whitaker et al. 2000). The dramatic style in which bona fide features are presented resembles the fiction style, except that features are created from reality, from the information reported from real-life situations. Soft news, according to Rich (2003), is news “that focus on people, places and issues that affect readers’ lives” (Rich 2003). Such an approach will help to fight stigma and encourage the general population to share their communities with PLWHA. There is copious literature on AIDS-associated stigma (Goffman 1963; Herek 1990, 1999; Jones et al. 1984) which suggests the need for a vigorous campaign against it. The human-interest approach will help focus the media’s agenda on *people* instead of *statistics*.

The data from this study show that there was not a single editorial comment on HIV and AIDS in any of the newspapers during the study period. Yet, a good newspaper has the responsibility not only to provide an honest and comprehensive reportorial coverage of its community but also to courageously express editorial opinions in support of the basic principles of human liberty and social progress (Emery 1962). Kamath (1980) argues that though only a few read editorials, editorials “help form and nurture public opinion, especially the opinion of the elite that alone frequently counts.” How can the Nigerian press draw attention to the problems associated with the pandemic with regard to policy making, implementation and management, and maybe corruption within the AIDS crisis? Or how can the press focus public attention on the social and economic complications of AIDS if it ignores the use of editorials, opinion articles and features?

The increase in opinion articles (31% in 2008) was a welcome trend. It showed that the newspapers were willing to open their pages to diverse opinions, enabling people in and outside their editorial teams to canvass views on the issues. The addition of letters to the editor on HIV and AIDS was also good for the press because letters provide good feedback for the newspapers. They also show that the public is being engaged by the press.

RQ3: What Was the Trend of Coverage Over Time? Finally, to answer RQ3, the data showed a steep decline in coverage. Editorial space allocated to HIV and AIDS in 2005 was 1.07 percent and 0.35% in 2008; that was a 78% decline. The percentage of HIV and AIDS cover-

age in 2010 was 0.06%; that was a decline of 83% from 2008. Thus, between 2005 and 2010, there was a massive decline in coverage of 94%. This represents an unacceptable dwindling of interest in HIV and AIDS coverage. It can, therefore, be concluded that Nigerian newspapers have devalued the severity of the HIV and AIDS and have, accordingly, lowered the coverage of the pandemic in their scale of priorities.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this study were based on analysing what was published. Further research is encouraged into the attitude of newspaper managements towards the coverage of the pandemic. But what has been revealed by this study strongly suggests that there is no articulate policy by the various newspapers for the coverage of HIV and AIDS.

The results suggest something even more alarming. The agenda-setting theory of the press associates what the people of a particular community think or talk about with an agenda set by the press through what they publish. The fear is, therefore, that the press may indeed be reflecting the attitude of the society it serves. If that is so, the Nigerian community has severely down-graded the severity of the AIDS crisis. It may then be hypothesised that *the longer a public health crisis lingers, the farther its severity recedes from the public mind*.

This hypothesis may provide the focus for further research: to find out through a survey of the populace whether the public feels less threatened by HIV and AIDS now than it did five to ten years ago.

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APPENDIX

The following acronyms, which appear in this research report, specifically in the review of available data, were adopted from the *UN-GASS Country Progress Report 2010*:

ANC	-	Ante-Natal Clinics	NACA	-	National Agency for the Control of AIDS
BCC	-	Behavioural Change Communication	NARHS	-	National HIV/AIDS Reproductive Health Survey
BSS	-	Behavioural Sentinel Survey	NDHS	-	National Demographic and Health Survey
FMOH	-	Federal Ministry of Health	NGOs	-	Non Governmental Organization
IBBSS	-	Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance Survey	PLWHA	-	People Living with HIV/AIDS
			UNAIDS	-	Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS
			UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
			UNESCO	-	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
			UNGASS	-	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
			UNICEF	-	United Nations International Children Education Funds