

A POWERFUL RESPONSIBILITY: Media Coverage of HIV/AIDS in Latin America

The media perform a fundamental role in the construction of social reality. Through the media, especially journalistic discourse, society gains access to those events that are not part of their direct experiences. The media convey “what happens”; define the public agenda and, at the same time, emphasize certain news attributes and omit others. As a result the media have the privilege of construing a reality to society through images and representations of different events.

The history of AIDS as a social issue began with an article published in *The New York Times* on July 3, 1981, that announced an increase in the number of pneumonia cases among homosexual men in the U.S. From that inaugural moment, news regarding the new virus traveled around the world. Especially in Latin America, where the number of unregistered cases is so high that it prevents an accurate picture of the actual impact of the disease, the media have become the most important resource for the construction of the reality about HIV/AIDS.

At the beginning of the epidemic, the metaphors regarding HIV tended to reinforce the negative connotations of already marginalized behaviors. The stigma associated with AIDS added to the pre-existent social differences.

- The use of the metaphors *red plague* or *gay cancer* associated AIDS with the homosexual community. This image was largely replaced in 1985 when heterosexual transmission was discovered.
- The so-called *high risk groups* accentuated the stigmatization of populations including sex workers, drug users and sexual minorities.
- Metaphors associating HIV with guilt and punishment promoted the marginalization of the epidemic.

In Latin American and the Caribbean, the metaphors used in the news about HIV/AIDS evolved and changed with the image built around HIV.

- Images of the homosexual community have become less prominent due to the change in the epidemiological profile. However, in countries like Mexico, this has marginalized the cases of men who have sex with men.
- The use of terms like *homosexual*, *gay* or *bisexual* persists and tends to confuse a sexual identity with a sexual behavior.
- Even though most of the metaphors have been eliminated, others such as *carrier* (assuming that the person who lives with HIV will “carry” a differential marking) or *victim* (evoking weakness or impotence) still characterize the media’s discourse.
- AIDS has been described in Spanish as *el mal*, a label that was previously associated with Nazism.
- In Central American newspapers, as in Nicaragua, one still finds alarming headlines using the terms *panic* or *AIDS-ridden*.

However, in spite of these representations, a greater level of responsibility in the use of information regarding HIV/AIDS has been evident recently. In Brazil, for example, the media played a fundamental role in putting the antiretroviral therapy problem in the public agenda, which led to universal coverage in 1997. The sensitization efforts of civil society organizations, mostly in Central America, have also played an important role in this process.

New Forms of News Production and Consumption

As a result of globalization, both economically and symbolically, the news has become a product that must adhere to market laws. Sensationalizing stories becomes the main strategy and, often, the role of informing is relegated to entertainment sources. Sensationalist rhetoric and the narration of individual cases are used to tell stories about HIV/AIDS.

- In Bolivia, where 90% of cases are undocumented and HIV continues to be quite stigmatized, each new case becomes news.
- In Central American newspapers, one can find news that accuses people of “injecting” others with HIV, that claims AIDS is to blame for the economic crisis, or that reports on the number of suicides caused by AIDS.

Finally, the same market dynamics that impose new trends frequently result in a media agenda that doesn’t match the development of the HIV epidemic. While the press waits anxiously for a cure or at least new treatments, the scientific community understands that changes will occur slowly.

- Treatments that have merely finished a research stage are presented as the “salvation”, without considering that people who live with HIV will not benefit until the treatments are available.
- The headlines that emphasize the lack of a vaccine overlook details about prevention.
- New epidemiological data get the media’s attention, even though the data are often misinterpreted and taken out of context.

First-person accounts or the showcasing of the most immediate aspects of the epidemic, while contributing to the humanization of people living with HIV, often divert attention away from the structural aspects of the problem. At the same time, this marketing logic reduces the quality of journalism by promoting constructed facts.

Even though HIV/AIDS is part of the media’s agenda, coverage is irregular. Particular events, such as World AIDS Day, get the most attention and epidemiological data are prioritized over information about the social or structural aspects of the epidemic.

The relevance of the media’s role in communicating information related to preventing and eliminating HIV/AIDS is indisputable. Presently there is no vaccine capable of preventing HIV infection. The only way to reduce the expansion and social impact of the epidemic is to provide basic and responsible information about the subject. The media have the power to keep HIV/AIDS in the public agenda and to establish its qualitative characteristics. It is within that power that the media’s responsibility lies.