

Voices of Citizen Journalists on HIV and AIDS: Implications for the Next Generation of Researchers

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ABSTRACT

The Caribbean is experiencing major challenges beyond those related to the treatment of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and its sequel, the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). The region has an HIV-infection rate that is second only to that in the Sub-Saharan Africa and the burden of proof on particular groups is especially difficult. The objective of this study is to analyse scientifically, the narratives of citizen journalists of two Jamaican national newspapers. The method incorporated a context-dependent qualitative inquiry, which is an emerging design in research. A systematic approach was used for manageability and included those citizens whose voices are often unheard. The narratives were published within the first two weeks of the news cycle when the topic was front-page news. Fourteen narratives met those criteria. The results are the emergence of three themes: outrage, bothersome facts/burdensome detail, and escalating tolerance. The conclusion of this study is that Jamaicans are vocal on the need for inclusivity, but simultaneously believe that such support should exclude groups with varying sexual preferences, such as the men who have sex with men (MSM) group. Despite the harsh discrimination expressed, there is movement towards tolerance for sexual diversity than previously thought. The implications of the study's findings for education, research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Citizen journalists, HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, narratives

Voces de Periodistas Ciudadanos Sobre VIH y SIDA: Implicaciones Para la Próxima Generación de Investigadores

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RESUMEN

El Caribe está experimentando grandes desafíos más allá de los relacionadas con el tratamiento del virus de inmunodeficiencia humana (VIH) y su secuela, el síndrome de la inmunodeficiencia adquirida (SIDA). La región tiene una tasa de infección superada sólo por la del África Subsahariana, y la carga de la prueba en determinados grupos es especialmente difícil. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar científicamente los relatos de los periodistas ciudadanos de dos diarios nacionales de Jamaica. El método incorporó una investigación cualitativa dependiente del contexto, que es un diseño emergente en la investigación. Se utilizó un enfoque sistemático para la manejabilidad y se incluyó a aquellos ciudadanos cuyas voces son a menudo desconocidas. Los relatos fueron publicados en las dos primeras semanas del ciclo de noticias, cuando el tema fue noticia de primera plana. Catorce relatos cumplían con esos criterios. Los resultados son la aparición de tres temas: indignación, hechos molestos/detalles onerosos, y au-

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mento de la tolerancia. La conclusión de este estudio es que los jamaicanos hacen oír sus voces sobre la necesidad de inclusión, pero al mismo tiempo creen que ese apoyo debe excluir a grupos con diferentes preferencias sexuales, como los hombres que tienen sexo con otros hombres (HSH). A pesar de la severa discriminación expresada, existe el movimiento hacia una mayor tolerancia a la diversidad sexual que antes. Se discuten las implicaciones de los resultados del estudio de investigación para la educación y la práctica.

Palabras claves: Periodistas ciudadanos, VIH/SIDA, homosexualidad, relatos

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INTRODUCTION

The Caribbean is experiencing major challenges beyond those related to the treatment of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and its sequel, the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). The region has an infection rate of HIV and AIDS that is second only to that of Sub-Saharan Africa (1), and the burden of proof on particular groups is especially difficult. Whereas people of African descent and men who have sex with men (MSM), carry a disproportionate burden of these diseases in the United States America (2), in the Caribbean, “unprotected sex between men and women, especially paid sex, is thought to be the main mode of HIV transmission”(1). The same report brought to view that “HIV prevalence among MSM in Jamaica, Chile and Panama was 38%, 20% and 23%, respectively, and is far higher than among the general population in these countries” (1). The disease has spread throughout the region against the background of poverty, gender inequality and stigma and a belief that the region is attractive for sex tourism (3).

However, among certain sectors of the Caribbean community, the perception is that the aetiology of the disease resides solely with the MSM group. This assumption was further confirmed in the heat of the scenario mentioned earlier. Indeed, previous work in the African-American population, particularly the Afro-Caribbean sub-group, indicates high levels of discrimination against homosexual groups (4, 5). The purpose of this study was to analyse scientifically, the narratives of citizen journalists on the subject of HIV and AIDS in a cumulative way and the implications for their thoughts on this topic for the next generation of researchers across disciplines, including journalists, as they secure promotion and tenure.

While a review of the literature is not mandatory in qualitative research (6), to prevent an *a priori* perspective, a brief review of the role of the media in communicating multiple healthcare messages, including HIV and

AIDS, is undertaken.

Hall indicates that newspapers go far beyond that basic function of reporting the news. He observed that at all times “the press performs a significant role as a social educator through linguistic and visual style, presentation and format and their rhetoric for specific audiences and topics make the news meaningful” (7). In addition, Yoo, Kwon and Pfeiffer agree that the media are influential sources of knowledge and attitude and a means through which the public can be made aware of its susceptibility to diseases (8). In the classic works of Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt, the news media have an extensive reputation of altering people’s thinking on political issues at the voting booth (9). More recently, White, in his dissertation, confirmed the importance of the media in shaping people’s opinions on health issues (10). This case study, expanded previously mentioned work to include citizen journalists through newspaper narratives. In this way, professionals, including medical researchers, will be able to better understand how to administer all levels of care; policy-makers will be able to advocate for disenfranchised groups; academicians can have a vantage point from which to teach diversity, and media practitioners, a way to develop and disseminate news.

According to Mistry and Driedger, media content analyses are fairly common-place approaches in the academic literature as a means of understanding how issues and events are framed for public consumption (11).

Narrative is defined as “a representation of connected events and characters that has an identifiable structure, is bounded in space and time, and contains implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed” (11). A citizen journalist is defined as a person who is not a trained journalist, but who is involved in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and other forms of information. The objective is to provide independent, wide-ranging and relevant information that is critical to democratic societies (12). This inquiry purports to answer the following questions:

1) What are the responses of the primary audience to expert opinion on HIV and AIDS? 2) What implications might these responses have for the growth and success of aspiring researchers?

METHOD

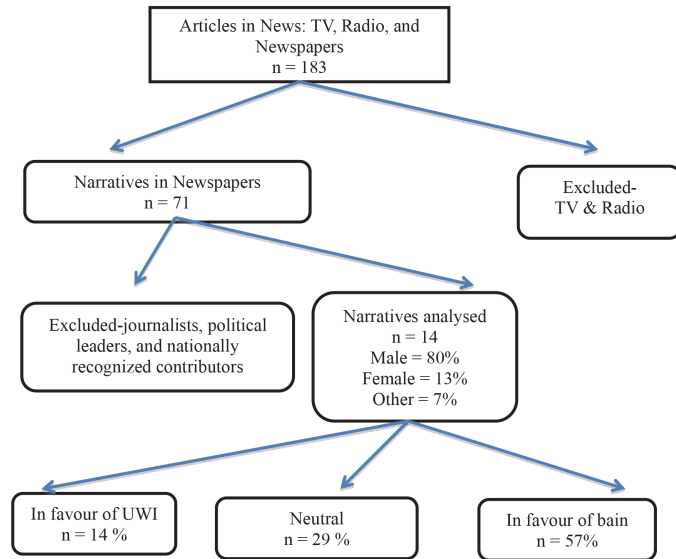
This study incorporated a context-dependent inquiry which is an emerging research strategy.

This qualitative design describes the reports published in Jamaican national newspapers. Since this study uses narratives that were in the public domain, no ethical permission was required from the institutional review board. Although this is not a study on human subjects, the researchers upheld ethically responsible conduct of research in handling the data, being cognizant of their personal feelings on the case and held them in abeyance as is necessary in naturalistic inquiry, thus, converting the data into an objective review. The researchers used a systematic process to formulate the development of evidence. Between May 18 and June 29, 2014, when the case was an active part of the news cycle, 183 articles were published in the national newspapers and on the television.

In keeping with the recommendation to make the work manageable (13), the researchers developed inclusion and exclusion criteria and refocused on first two weeks, since studies indicate that pre-occupation with issues in the media tend to wane after that time frame (14). The objective of this work was to listen to the voices of journalists who are known to be fearless in voicing their opinions through the news media and in public debates, yet they are often unheard (15). Eligibility for this analysis included the narratives of journalists, published within the first two weeks of the news cycle and recorded in the national newspapers. The opinions regarding the decision of the University were not part of the inclusion criteria. Based on the nature of the data, the researchers could not control demographic variables, citizenship, or sexual or religious preferences. Fourteen narratives met these criteria as disaggregated in the visual representation.

In analysing the data, the researchers followed the steps outlined by Huberman and Miles (16).

Margin notes → reflective passages → codes → note pattern/themes → count frequency of codes for each theme



The researchers recorded partial and complete statements as reported in the narratives. From those statements, the researchers counted the patterns and themes and after counting the frequency of the codes, three themes emerged: outrage, bothersome facts/burdensome details, and escalating tolerance. One theme was the actual words of a citizen journalist, but was enough to build a logical chain. The narratives from the accessible data might be meaningful to the target population of experts reporting on HIV and AIDS and might also have implications for promotion and tenure for faculty in university settings.

Sample

The researchers collected data by examining documents and organized the data into categories and themes that cut across all the sources. Twenty stories were reviewed but upon immersion in the data, and as part of the analysis, six stories did not meet the criteria. Of the 14 stories analysed, over 80% of the reports were contributed by male writers and the gender of one was unknown; 50% of the reports were original postings and a large percentage of the narratives expressed feelings of dissatisfaction with political leaders in addressing the case. To the researchers' knowledge, 13 reports emanated from Jamaica. Fourteen per cent of the citizen journalists agreed with the decision of the UWI, 57% agreed with Bain and 29% were neutral. All these reports were published in the two major Jamaican national newspapers, one of which embraces a liberal political perspective and the other conservative.

Themes

Outrage

The anger voiced in the reports suggested discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. One citizen journalist expressed incredulity at the changes to his right to freedom of expression and that “tooting his horn” in support of demonstrators in the wake of the case was suddenly, unknown to him, a criminal offence. Similar statements supporting outrage included “tacit support of the homosexual agenda”, suggesting a hidden schema of support for homosexuality using tax payers’ dollars and “putting a gag order on science” – interpreted to mean silencing medical researchers. Another report described the University as becoming a puppet of the funding agencies that support the LGBT community. However, statements such as “the University should be an entity which embraces diversity of views”, followed by “The University of the West Indies is pushing the J-Flag (Jamaica Forum for Lesbians All-sexuals and Gays) agenda”, indicate outrage that the LGBT community should be included in such an embrace, which is clearly paradoxical. Anger and deception were articulated using stinging examples that touch core values such as, “This is the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau”, a phrase that is fundamentally understood and crystallised in the people of the Caribbean, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Angry citizen journalists requested that medical science remains separated from interpreting the law, with statements such as “MAJ [Medical Association of Jamaica] can take off its legal hat” and that the University should maintain its objectivity despite its fiscal connections. The anger among those citizen journalists extended beyond the then current issue to include dissatisfaction with past elected officials who chimed in on homosexuality which is perceived as a moral issue. The citizen journalists described such politicians as suddenly becoming a “czar of critical thinking or the voice of reason”. The narrators did not recant from reminding them of their perceived failed leadership, describing one government leader as “not realising the significance of the season of his return, or perhaps he thought we forgot”. The narrators used the perceived flawed leadership approaches to weaken such leaders’ perspective on this issue. This tendency is consistent with community members’ views about their political leaders, regardless of their participation in the electoral process.

Bothersome facts and burdensome details

The opposing positions of the citizen journalists in this case created a situation where scientific truths were evident, but the details surrounding their perspectives were based on their preconceived notions about the LGBT community and HIV and AIDS. They used the opportunity that this *Bain vs UWI* case presented to comment on issues that were either tangentially related to this case or totally unrelated. Examples of burdensome facts included statements such as, “a recognition of the unhealthy consequences of anal sex which pose health hazards and consequently healthcare costs”, “The issues related to HIV/AIDS prevention and management extend beyond the philosophies of both gay and Christian activists . . . neither group owns this issue”.

There was a clear burden of responsibility placed on the prime minister that highlighted more details than he would care to remember and simultaneously recognising his “eloquence on any subject matter he sees fit . . .”. What was particularly bothersome to the citizen journalists was the “. . . yet unresolved massacre of more than 70 of his constituents under his watch”. Another loaded message which addresses a moral weight of risky sexual behaviour despite sexual preferences follows:

“We must recognise that the temptation homosexual men face to have sex with other men is no different from the temptation some heterosexual men face to have sex with their neighbour’s wives or their daughters. The urges are equally as powerful, but is nonetheless equally wrong and it remains wrong even if the urges last for many many years”.

Escalating tolerance

The narratives revealed increasing acceptance of homosexuality in a country widely regarded as homophobic. Such evidence was clear when citizen journalists expressed the view that if clemency can be given to murderers, thieves and liars in prison, then MSM groups should be given the same forgiveness, which suggests that “all sin is sin”. Another narrator reminded the readers of the efforts that have been made to urge churches not to allow their antipathy to hinder them from ministering to people who are of diverse sexual orientations in a pluralistic society. There was also advice that church leaders should remain focused on maintaining spiritual integrity without interfering with people’s sexual preferences. One citizen journalist expressed the view that one’s place in society cannot absolve one from making

any statement that could be perceived as harmful to the cause of the LGBT community. To that end, one narrator noted, “you can be hounded out of your job and punished in any way that they can find . . .”. Whereas, some reports could be taken as expressions of outrage for homosexuality, statements such as, “Yuh cyaan even talk de trute dat dem a de chief spredda a AIDS, nuh care if yuh a big doctor an gi dem facks. . .”, (one cannot even speak the truth, that they are the main carriers of the AIDS virus, does not matter if you are a Doctor and have medical information), “speak to the distance Jamaicans have come in understanding the issue”. For this pilot work, the researchers used the steps to establish credibility as guided by Huberman and Miles (16).

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to present the responses of the primary audience to expert opinion on HIV and AIDS and to address the implications for those responses on the growth and success of the next generation of researchers. The researchers present an analysis of the relevant aspects of the narrative as published in *The Gleaner* and *The Observer*, two of Jamaica’s daily national newspapers. The use of narratives in research is gaining ground, and empirical results indicate the power of narratives to alter people’s opinions and attitudes (17). Although the subject was no longer front-page news, since the case is still in court, the researchers capitalised on this window of opportunity. In this way educators in health communication will be prepared when the story regains currency in the media. The researchers also decided on using the citizen journalists, a group with limited access to the traditional media.

Based on the history of stigmatisation in the Caribbean (18, 19), the researchers expected the narratives to attack the stigmatised group, but found that the views were split. This study is empirical at many levels as it sheds light on the thoughts and attitudes of the citizens and the implications of the case. As one citizen journalist said, “. . . we are concerned that the outcome of this case will affect the delivery of education in all our institutions”, and healthcare. The researchers considered the assumptions of the themes and the implications for education, research and practice.

Jamaicans are vocal on the need for inclusivity and simultaneously believe that such support should exclude groups with varying sexual preferences, such as the MSM. Some citizens perceive homosexuality as an environmental issue and some as genetically determined.

The finding of discrimination against the MSM group and people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA), has been identified in the literature and also among church groups (20, 5). The use of Biblical analogies to express deception might be intentionally done to influence those who are ambivalent to take a position. Indeed, churches and biblical teachings have helped people of colour during times of economic hardships dating back to slavery (20). With such resilience, both gay, and straight individuals with HIV and AIDS, might be reluctant to seek medical care and expert opinion might be compromised. The outraged citizen journalists extended their anger towards political leaders who have to make tough decisions during their tenure – decisions that might be beneficial to some and harmful to others. Jamaican citizens believe that such are not allowed to speak on issues of morality. If that is the case, then such viewpoints might mean that very few citizens are eligible to present an expert opinion, therefore a clearer definition is warranted for the term “diversity” within the Jamaican context.

The worrisome knowledge of HIV transmission and its weight on the Jamaican economy, is disturbing. Yet, from this analysis, it seems that the blame is on specific groups, such as the MSM and sex-workers. This perspective has cultural implications as stigmatisation is alive, and HIV will continue to be rampant in the region if there cannot be frank dialogue across groups. Even the dissension regarding equalizing sexual enticements regardless of sexual preference might be stigma-based. Probably, closer inspection of research done on sexuality in the animal kingdom, a perspective from which human behaviour is more clearly understood, is indicated. This might also mean a closer examination of core values and beliefs and how those values are lived within the Caribbean context. These are preliminary findings in Jamaica. Indeed, stigma has been identified in other parts of the world (4) where citizens might feel safer in declaring their lived experiences. This recommendation is also consistent with the need for increased transdisciplinary and inter-collaboration in research. Thus, multiple perspectives of sexuality may be uncovered that will assist in the discussion of the origins (genetics) or development (environment) of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV and AIDS. Perhaps, the answers exist and the authors invite further scrutiny.

Despite the lingering infuriation which is used to attack the incompetence and dissatisfaction with the University’s response to special interest groups, citizens are moving towards open-mindedness to homosexuality. This movement might be due to the fear of a merging ap-

praisal for having a position that is not popular regardless of scientific evidence or moral beliefs and values. This study revealed some citizens surrendering their position on the subject in the use of “Mek dem gwaan” (leave them alone). Member checking with other citizens of Jamaica, clarified this term as used when there is a change of heart or when enough energy has been expended on an issue and it is time to move forward. The subject of HIV and AIDS and sexuality has roots that are deeper than can be “surgically excised” in one study.

The researchers chose to use the dialect expressed in the narratives as a way of sustaining their culture. Indeed, dialects are profoundly appreciated in the Caribbean as it speaks to who we are as a people since much of its richness seems buried in paradise (19). Consistent with Saunders, “. . . indigenous voices survive through the dialects . . . children of the original slaves negotiated a new sense of language, religion and tradition which reaffirms the African heritage in the Caribbean context” (20).

Limitations and recommendations

The researchers are aware of the limitations of this preliminary work – sensitive area of HIV and AIDS and homosexuality in the region. Undeniably, it was a small sample of qualitative design; it was confined to citizens who were literate or those who had the cognitive ability to present their perspectives. To minimise bias, the researchers excluded traditional journalists, columnists and educators from the University. These limits prevented the study’s findings’ generalisability. However, this study is relevant to improve science and knowledge. It also presents a perspective for the next generation of researchers in journalism, healthcare or any discipline, in handling professional conflicting topics of public interest. We recommend the analyses of narratives from other media sources, that religious groups be examined and that marginalised groups be considered in future studies. In this way, a fuller understanding of the issues surrounding people’s beliefs and attitudes in this sexually diverse population will be garnered. The findings of such studies will inform medical researchers to tailor interventions specifically for Jamaicans.

In order to reduce the wholistic fallacy of this study’s data, the researchers recommend a replication of the study where the findings may be tested with a new data set. Finally, a larger mixed methods sequential approach is highly recommended.

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