

“The VIHsibilité Project”: HIV-positive people in the Québec press and community responses

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The VIHsibilité Project is a community-based action-research initiative that examines newspaper coverage of HIV/AIDS issues in Québec from 1988 to 2004. Using standard qualitative research methods, and in consultation with an advisory committee of people directly impacted by HIV/AIDS news coverage, the project discerns trends in reporting on HIV/AIDS and undertakes discursive content analysis of these, aiming to better understand in what normative ways seropositive people are represented in print media, and, ultimately, to reduce the stigma attendant upon HIV infection. Preliminary findings include indications that seropositive women tend to be represented markedly differently from men in the news.

Keywords: media; cultural studies; gender; HIV/AIDS; stigma

Introduction

This study delves into the cultural analysis of media messages and discourse about men and women living with HIV over the course of 16 years of press coverage. One goal of the VIHsibilité Project is to identify how media discourse creates social environments for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) by generating ways of seeing them. In tracing prevalent images, we hope to enable the development of more empowering social environments and media discourses for PLWHA, thereby reducing discrimination and stigma.

This paper presents partial and preliminary data from our study. We present the constitution of our media corpus as well as methods used to form an interpretive community for the news coverage examined. We identify key moments of PLWHA visibility over time, of men and women alike. Gendered representations of men and women are compared across three regimes of media visibility: diagnostic, classificatory and activist. Community responses to these often contradictory meanings and representations are discussed.

Critical and historical perspectives

Cultural studies are the basis of critical analysis for this project. This approach considers culture in light

of historical forces and power relations articulated through social change (Grossberg, 1992; Hall, 1988). Central to it is the idea that discourse intimately affects everyone in complex ways because the ideological work of the media “hails” us toward a dominant system of meaning (Althusser, 1970). A message always carries a potential multitude of meanings; in the media, ideology attempts to fix meaning so that one of these will be privileged above others. However, an ideologically laden message is not always interpreted uniformly or as intended. Because media messages are polysemic and people’s capacities for interpretation differ (according to their cultural capital, for example), received messages are not entirely restricted within a monolithic register. Thus cultural studies also postulate the necessity of exploring links between the dominant culture of a society and its subcultures, along with the role media plays in constructing social phenomena (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). The VIHsibilité Project seeks to take a fuller account of manifold meanings conveyed by the news media.

Many cultural studies have focused on the media explosion from the beginning of the epidemic until the mid-1990s (Bayer, 1991; Dagenais, 1997; Grevisse, 1993; Kinsella, 1989; Lemaire, 1989; Mauriac, 1990). Relatively few studies have made explicit reference to news media discourse from the epidemic’s second decade to the turn of the twenty-first

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century (Gillet, 2003; Griffin, 2001), some of which address the feminization of the pandemic (Johnson, 2002; Mensah, 2003). Additional research shows that stigma and discrimination are an obstacle to effective HIV prevention care and support (Chesney & Smith, 1999; Fortenberry et al., 2002) and that mass media have played a central role in fostering stereotypes and prejudice about PLWHA, especially by portraying gay men (Albert, 1986; Crimp, 1992; Patton, 1990; Watney, 1989) and other marginalized groups (Lupton, 1999; Sacks, 1996) as deviant.

PLWHA rarely appear in mass media, but when they do their representation is informed by a relative invisibility. During the 1980s, news coverage of the AIDS epidemic was grounded in a moral rhetoric regarding gay men as “other”. This became the dominant motif for PLWHA in the media; homophobia was the foundation for a more generalized AIDS phobia (Treichler, 1987). The 1990s were characterized by the normalization of AIDS; the epidemic seemed slowed, and moral panic decreased (Setbon, 2000). As HIV/AIDS came to be understood as a chronic rather than terminal disease, Griffin (2001) noted a decreasing visibility of HIV/AIDS in the media. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the realization that the pandemic has multiple faces fragmented infected populations into a series of vulnerable subgroups.

Methodology

Formation of a newspaper corpus

A search for HIV/AIDS keywords (e.g. VIH, sida, séropositif, séropositives, séropositifs, sidéennes, sidéenne, sidéen, sidéens) in the electronic databases of Québec’s four major francophone daily newspapers (*La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *Le Soleil* and *Le Droit*) published between 1988 and 2004 yielded 15,668 articles, in digital and in microfilm format. The majority of these articles were published between 1993 and 2004.

Faced with such a large corpus, a further sampling strategy was required before content and discursive analysis could be undertaken. Two of these samples will be discussed in this paper. The first is comprised of 12,754 articles published between 1993 and 2004 and easily accessible in full-text format. The second sample consists of 1046 articles selected randomly for content by gender, published between 1988 and 2004. Discursive analysis was performed for both samples.

Computer-assisted analyses were conducted using qualitative data analysis software (S.A.T.O., ATLAS.ti). In all samples, selected articles were

considered relevant if they mentioned keywords related to women and/or men living with HIV/AIDS, and if these keywords were found in sentences explicitly about PLWHA. One such sample ($n1=2687$) contains articles published in a window of 4 months per year (June/July and November/December) between 1988 and 2004. Another sample ($n2=2487$) contains all articles published in two years one decade apart, 1288 articles in 1994 and 1199 articles in 2004. The content analyses sought to determine “who” is made visible over time and how.

Formation of interpretive communities

An advisory committee was formed early on in the project to reflect the specific preoccupations of members of several milieus – community-based, institutional, professional – that are directly impacted by news coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic; people who are interested in creating a media environment supportive of PLWHA. This group acts as interpretive communities by participating in interpretation of research results, proposing directions for further analyses and planning joint responses. “Interpretive communities” is a theoretical concept that implies readings of a text are culturally constructed (Fish, 1980). As such, a text does not have meaning outside of a set of cultural assumptions regarding what the content means and how it should be interpreted. The interpretation of articles collected within our newspaper corpus, then, is dependent upon each reader’s own subjective experience in one or more communities, each of these defined by a distinct epistemology and specific concerns.

Members of the advisory committee include people living with HIV/AIDS and representatives from AIDS service organizations (Action Séro-Zéro, Canadian AIDS Society, Centre d’Action sida femmes de Montréal, Comité des personnes atteintes du VIH du Québec, and Stella); media professionals (affiliated with www.frequencevih.ca; individual mainstream press journalists) and institutional milieus (Archives gaies du Québec, Association des intervenants en toxicomanie du Québec, Service de lutte contre les ITSS, Ministère de la Santé, et des Services sociaux du Québec). The group has met in person three times so far (September 2006, February 2007 and May 2007). Regular communication via telephone and email was established between members in between these face-to-face meetings. Each encounter allowed us to move further into analysis of the data collected. The following section describes preliminary findings obtained during these meetings up until May 2007.

Preliminary findings

Québec newspapers: trends in reporting on HIV/AIDS, 1993–2004

The year of the greatest number of relevant articles (1381) was 1993. A diminution of these can be seen over the following two years, with the most marked decrease occurring in 1996 (782). There was a slight increase in 1997 (942) followed by another decrease in 1998 and 1999. From 2000 onward a constant increase can be observed. In 2004 alone there were 1199 reported articles containing at least one of the HIV/AIDS-related keywords. The difference in percentage between the year comprising the greatest number of articles (1993) and that comprising the least (1996) is 43%.

Developing a community reading

Close reading of the articles in their entirety allowed the identification of six recurrent themes encompassing several aspects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic: scientific, biomedical, social, political, economic, cultural and personal, as well as regimes of media visibility of PLWHAs. Regimes of infected peoples' visibility include three types of media visibility: diagnostic, classificatory and activist.

These first analytic categorizations were frequently compared with day-to-day concerns of PLWHA and their representatives within the research advisory committee. Drafting a list of organizing themes raised problems of interpretation on a number of occasions as different members of interpretive communities disagreed or did not share the same understanding of certain content categories. Themes that were deemed confusing were reformulated as the research progressed, according to the interests of the advisory committee. By the third draft of the list, a useful tool for doing a community reading had been developed and specific print media items to be prioritized for discursive analysis were identified.

Moments of media visibility

Preliminary discourse analyses revealed that over time there are key moments of high media visibility for PLWHAs. PLWHAs generally appear in the news on specific occasions, including: major scientific discoveries (e.g. HIV, AZT, vaccine trials, PEP), AIDS events (e.g. December 1st, international conferences) and disclosure of public personas as HIV-positive (e.g. Rock Hudson, Kimberly Bergalis, Magic Johnson, Maria DiLorenzo). In addition, gender, sexuality and racial categories informed PLWHA media visibility.

Extracting sentences/contexts containing targeted keywords was a crucial step towards developing qualitative research categories for a thematic analysis of the evolution of press discourse surrounding PLWHA. In-depth analysis of the distribution of content by gender for the period 1988–1994 was performed for a total of 1046 randomly selected articles. Findings suggest there is a higher incidence of themes related to testing and treatment (diagnostic visibility), and activism (activist visibility) in sentences/contexts including keywords *VIH/sida* (HIV/AIDS) in the women's category. Sentences/contexts sorted into the men's category show a higher incidence of themes relating to criminality (classificatory visibility).

Gendered visibility

PLWHA are represented in the media according to different regimes for understanding their seropositive identity. Diagnostic visibility refers to media messages about epidemiology and testing. In distinguishing risk groups from the general population these messages relegate seropositive people to the status of virological agents.

Classificatory visibility refers to messages about HIV exposure identities. These messages represent infected people in terms of social identity categories, and tend to conflate who the person is (identity) with what practices s/he engages in and the risks associated with them. Our data shows that the emergence of HIV-positive women shifts over time, ranging from isolated reports of infected prostitutes and mothers during the first decade of the epidemic to alarming statistics of a growing "feminization of the pandemic", especially in Africa, at the turn of the twenty-first century. The emergence of HIV-positive men over time, however, is more consistent, and systematically refers to reports of AIDS among men with socially marginalized practices, such as sex with other men and drug use. Several "classes" of HIV-positive men appear in the media, ranging from the original "three Hs" (homosexuals, heroin users, Haitians) to recent pictures of criminally negligent or otherwise dangerous persons, whose behaviour is risky for self and others. A recent example is the highly publicized story of HIV-positive street prostitute Calvin Alexandre Chartier.

Representations of HIV-positive women are more varied. Framing of women primarily as vessels in the 1980s led to a generic notion of women's "need" for greater access to care, treatment and support as "innocent victims" in a culture fraught with gender inequality and violence against women. The famous story of paediatric surgeon Maria DiLorenzo is

discursively typical. She emerged as a PLWHA who did not owe her seropositivity to “wild” sexuality; otherwise, newspaper stories about her rapidly shifted focus to ethical debates about privacy rights, rendering her invisible.

Activist visibility refers to messages about community building and resistance. These messages often centre on the infected subject him/herself struggling for self-determination, attempting to escape deterministic identification by portraying greater depths of seropositive experience. Female HIV-positive activists are presented as individually involved in local, national and international groups. Increasingly, since 2000, their role in addressing the challenges raised by issues of access to care, treatment and support takes centre stage. Male HIV-positive activists are icons of early and current collective community responses aimed at government inaction (e.g. funding, prevention programmes). Few attempts are made to fight misrepresentations about HIV and PLWHAs. Overall, a comparative analysis for the 1988–2004 period showed that women tend to be associated with diagnostic and activist visibility, while men tend to be more often associated with classificatory visibility.

Discussion

Community responses to and interpretations of the preliminary findings reflect the role of the advisory committee. After one year of activity, the VIHsibilité Project has identified numerous ways in which gendered news press coverage can impact community responses to HIV/AIDS and, inversely, how community responses can affect local AIDS press coverage. Members of the committee are now very interested in the ways in which HIV exposure identities are relayed by the news media as fact rather than as single interpretations among many possible ones. The issue of competing and contradictory meanings of these identities, for example, is a subject for further discussion. Some feel that identity categories are useful to allow for communities and individuals living with the disease to recognize themselves and be “hailed” by media discourse. Others find these messages reproduce damaging reductionist views of PLWHA.

Based on samples of newspaper articles about PLWHA published over time, moments of their newsworthiness, as well as gendered types of media visibility, we have outlined two major directions for further analyses. First, interpretive communities propose to better define what constitutes “empowering media environments.” Second, they want to research the uses and impacts of the meanings of HIV/AIDS and PLWHA testimonies by the print news media.

Hence, only these two recurrent themes will be investigated further across regimes of media visibility.

Finally, planning community-based responses requires more face-to-face discussions with media professionals. Their presence on the advisory committee has already been interpreted as crucial. Negotiating with often contradictory meanings and representations of HIV-positive women and men, as well as negotiating with organizational constraints, are a shared venture. In this context, community-based AIDS service organizations, academic and institutional milieus together with media professionals can make a difference in reducing discrimination and stigma.

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