

Content Analysis Study of News Headlines in Print Media of Assam on HIV/AIDS Coverage

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ABSTRACT: *The media can render yeoman's services. It can report HIV cases hidden in the remote parts of the country and expose the kind of medical services provided by the hospitals and health centers. More importantly, it can give a human face to the issue of HIV/AIDS. However, experts are critical of media coverage of HIV/AIDS. This paper is a commentary on the role of print media in Assam with respect to its coverage of HIV/AIDS news based on the framing analysis technique of the news headlines of four prominent newspapers of the state for a period of one year.*

Key Words: *: HIV, AIDS, The Assam Tribune, The Sentinel, The Asomiya Pratidin, The Times of India.*

Introduction

Peter Piot, former Chief of UNAIDS, is of the opinion that media can help in arresting the 'invasion' of HIV/AIDS when he says that the "levers of change are to be found in pulpits and press-rooms as much as in the health centers. Changing norms surrounding behavior change which is at the heart of HIV prevention has never been a task best left to men in white coats. We need doctors and nurses to provide treatment, but when it comes to HIV prevention more lives will be saved by journalists, teachers, and politicians".

The above-quoted statement literally sums up the role of mass media in preventing HIV/AIDS that has claimed the lives of millions of people already. Currently, there are more than 45 million people living with AIDS (PLWAs) across the globe. They need knowledge and information to empower themselves to lead a normal life with a consciousness for behavior change. It is true they are affected by the turn of events, but they are living beings and they have a right to life. No doubt widespread ignorance has been one of the principal reasons behind the multiplication of the disease. Nevertheless, it is not 'too late' for, the media can educate and make people aware of the pandemic by breaking the silence around it. It can launch a crusade against the stigma, discrimination, and taboos associated with HIV/AIDS. It can encourage people to talk openly about HIV/AIDS and impose upon the government and non-governmental agencies to provide prompt service delivery to HIV/AIDS patients. Life is dear to all, and people living with AIDS are not an exception. Even they need love and compassion for their survival apart from providing them with *anti-retroviral*. The stigma and discrimination faced by people infected with HIV at the health centers; families and society can be brought to the fore by the media. Media is not 'medication' but it can surely become the panacea for ameliorating the plight of PLWAs.

Media experts all over the globe are of the view that effective media coverage can humanize and localize the HIV/AIDS issue, and spur public discourse, which in turn, will promote the government to prioritize HIV/AIDS issues into the country's social and political agenda. Media content shapes beliefs about the disease and influences response from governments and public attitudes towards the PLWAs. It can advocate accountability and responsibility and help the people to raise their voices.

The media can render yeoman's services. It can report HIV cases hidden in the remote parts of the country and expose the kind of medical services provided by the hospitals and health centers. More importantly, it can give a human face to the issue of HIV/AIDS. However, experts are critical of media coverage of HIV/AIDS. Dipankar De Sarkar of *Panos Features*, London (in Yesterday's News, HIV and Print Media) comments that much of the media coverage of AIDS these days is "about what governments, donors and UN agencies say and do, with an overarching emphasis on aid dollars. Duel crammed with figures, reading like press releases, drafted by some faceless AIDS bureaucrats, these news stories can range from a visiting western minister talking about HIV to bilateral aid agreements with a wealthy donor nation to the launch of a new report on AIDS by an international agency. Almost always, there will be one notable absentee in these stories. It is the old familiar, the voices of the poor and those living with AIDS. But no one seems to mind.

Pharmaceutical Companies, donor agencies, governments, even well-meaning NGOs appear to be quite content so long as their names and agendas appear in print”.

Materials and Methods

For this study, five newspapers, one from mainstream English press (*The Times of India*), three from regional press (*The Assam Tribune*, *The Telegraph* and *The Sentinel*) and one from the Assamese press (*The Asomiya Pratidin*) were selected in the view of their popularity and circulation for a period of one year from 1st January 2005 to 31st December 2005. This period was purposively selected as there were a lot of national and international issues that claimed media attention in 2005. The prominent one was the release of the 2006 UN report on the global spread of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) which stated that there was a global slowing down trend of the disease (UNAIDS, 2006, p. 2). However, what was of particular concern for the researcher was that in 2006, there were 38.6 million people worldwide living with the virus. More than four million people were infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in 2005 and 2.8 million died from AIDS-related illnesses globally (UNAIDS, 2006, p. 3). The three states with the highest HIV prevalence, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland are sharing borders with Assam.

Regarding the sampling procedure for the content analysis study, a *constructed week* sampling procedure was adopted. In order to do this, every eight-day was selected. For instance, a Monday of the first week, a Tuesday of the 2nd week, a Wednesday of the 3rd week and so on. That is, every eighth day was considered as a standard sample for the content analysis study.

Framing Analysis:

A scheme of analysis for the study of news media coverage in the selected newspapers was developed drawing on Neolle Neuman’s frames for news categories. Neuman et al. (in Semteko and Valkenburg, 2000) identify five conceptual frames that the news audiences use to make sense of the political news flow: the economic frame; the powerlessness frames and the morality frame. These news frames were modified to assimilate texts relevant to health communication discourse. Health news is defined by a distinctive emphasis on drama, conflict, and severity. Keeping this in mind, the following frames were developed and used for the analysis: 1. AIDS Awareness 2. Behaviour Change Advocating 3. Govt. Responsive/Critical 4. AIDS Prevention Interventions 5. Condom Promoting 6. Stigma Challenging and 7. Sex Education Advocacy. This scheme of analysis was applied to measure frames and their frequencies to gauge the print media's principles adopted while presenting news related to HIV/ AIDS, to facilitate a certainly predetermined course of decoding the message.

Analysis and Discussion

With this view in mind, a content analysis research study is undertaken to cross-examine the role of the print media in Assam to battle the scourge of HIV/AIDS that is confronting humans at present. The researcher feels that the print media in Assam have not fully realized their responsibility for the prevention, care, and treatment of the disease. The study of the print media in Assam revealed that a number of gaps exist which hinders them from effectively playing a role to spread awareness against HIV/AIDS. It was found that the print media of Assam lacked depth and there was little investigative reporting on HIV/AIDS. The reporter and correspondents working from rural areas lacked adequate knowledge on the issue. This was reflected by the fact there was less number of soft news like features, profiles, write-ups, etc., on HIV/AIDS. What they mostly reported was event-oriented hard news. They concentrated more on reporting inauguration, speech by dignitaries, seminars and conferences on HIV/AIDS. What can an ordinary reader/student learn from these news reports? They did not mention much on safe sex behavior, safe blood transfusion, safe pre, and post-natal health practices, etc. The news items also rarely advocated sex education among school and college going adolescents. Neither had they promoted condom usage nor sterilized syringes and medical equipment.

Likewise, they have failed to include the views/fears and apprehensions of the infected and high-risk people. The marginalized were left out, as the reporters lacked a sociological perspective on the issue, most of their reports failed to deal with the role of gender in the spread of the disease. Though HIV/AIDS can affect everyone, it is often the poor, youth and women in distress who are most vulnerable.

The content analysis undertaken has brought to light certain interesting facts about HIV/AIDS coverage by the print media. HIV/AIDS, despite being an issue of global concern continues to get scant attention in the print media. During the one year study period, the coverage of HIV/AIDS in the sample regional English and vernacular papers was below one percent of the total print space. The same was the coverage in the mainstream newspaper *The Times of India*. On the contrary, newspapers understudy gave substantial space to advertisements and other categories of news like politics, crime, business, sports, entertainment etc.

There has been a lack of follow up of the HIV/AIDS news by the newspapers. This, in turn, means that there is an acute lack of substantial reporting (campaigns) by newspapers. This may reflect that newspapers, in general, allow issues such as politics, crime, business to take the front seat and issues pertaining to health are relegated to back seat.

Even the hard news on HIV/AIDS concentrates on the personalities rather than the issue itself – the ‘who’ aspect is more pronounced than the ‘what’ aspect of the event. The researcher has found that the coverage of AIDS was event-oriented like the world AIDS Day or International Day on Drug Abuse. The news coverage was basically constricted to various meetings, seminars, camps organized by various government and NGOs on AIDS campaign. So, the prime discourse on AIDS news coverage was on **AIDS Prevention Initiatives** category. The next big thrust was on **AIDS Awareness Events**.

Come December and one will see the coverage on HIV/AIDS soaring high. There would be marginally better coverage than in other months of the year. However, even the coverage around the world AIDS Day was not very significant from the point of view of quality and treatment meted out to the news items. All the newspapers under study carried reports on the *walks, marches, and events* organized to mark World AIDS Day. *The Times of India* published four articles during the month of December’05 whereas *The Assam Tribune* published two articles on HIV/AIDS. But *The Sentinel* had gone a step ahead by publishing 7 articles during the month of December’05. But it was unfortunate to observe that *The Asomiya Pratidin* did not publish any articles on HIV/AIDS during the month of December.

The Sentinel published the highest number of public service advertisements from among the newspapers under study. It devoted a total of 2075 columns only to public service advertisements on HIV/AIDS.

It seemed in some cases the news reports on HIV/AIDS were only used to fill up the printing spare as they were carried on subsequent editions, much later after the actual date of occurrence, when the item had lost its ‘news value’.

The highest quantity print space for HIV/AIDS was devoted by *The Sentinel*, followed by *The Times of India*, which was followed by *The Assam Tribune*. This means that among the newspapers scanned, *The Sentinel* gave more weight HIV/AIDS issues than the other three newspapers. However, the overall volume of space given to AIDS issues remained minimal in all the papers under study, among which *The Asomiya Pratidin* reported the least on AIDS.

However, *The Assam Tribune* and *the Sentinel* gave more thrust to informed reporting and avoided sensationalism. *The Times of India* would sometimes take to sensationalism. It would use stigmatized words. For instance, “*Judd joins the battle against AIDS (August 29, 05)*”. The word – ‘*battle against AIDS*’ is a stigmatized word. Another sensational word used in the later part of the news item was ‘*monster in Africa*’. Again on 4th July 2005, *The Times of India* reported “*Central Directive on AIDS awareness*” wherein two sensational phrases were used – “*killer disease*” and “*Tackle the AIDS menace*”. During the study period, *The Sentinel* was found using a sensational tone only once. In the December 27th, issue of *The Sentinel* it had reported: “*Take up AIDS challenge, Handique to Lions Club*”, wherein the phrase: “*the specter of AIDS looming large*” was used.

The researcher was particularly watchful of when a title sounded sensational and the language/words/phrases were extreme. For example, the use of the phrases, “*Battle against AIDS*”, “*Monster*”, “*Killer disease*”, “*Tackle the AIDS menace*”, “*Spectre of AIDS looming large*” etc. etc., may be completely appropriate to describe the situation in the present times and optimal in convincing people of the deadly nature of the disease. The researcher would clarify these as sensational, nonetheless. If a person were to hear/read these words, one would immediately conclude that the language is ‘*charged*’. The repeated use of these terms to describe the disease creates the idea that HIV/AIDS is a quick-striking disaster, akin to a flood or a hurricane. It is true that the epidemic is a disaster, but to prevent the spread of the disease, readers must feel that HIV/AIDS is something they must control by behavior change (not a hurricane that leaves them paralyzed). Repeated sensational language reinforces the idea that the disease cannot be dealt with calmly and rationally.

The newspapers under study were also found wanting in highlighting the success stories, or stories that advocated cure, medical breakthrough, behavior change, sex education, and condom promotion. Hard news category was found to be taking the upper hand of soft stories. *AIDS prevention interventions* by government, NGOs and private individuals got more prominence in the newspapers under study. On 19/12/ 05, *The Times of India* published a soft news story on female condom promotion under the title “**Female Condom to hit the market this week**”, while *The Sentinel* published two soft stories on condom promotion: “**Centre to introduce female condom**” (July 12, 2005). Women are the worst hit victims of HIV/AIDS/STDs. This article speaks that women in India will now have a condom specially designed for them. Hindustan Latex Ltd

is launching India's female condom. Called Confidom, the condom will come in a pack of two, costing Rs 100/-. According to health ministry officials, this condom will better protect women against HIV/AIDS. At present male condoms are more easily available, but condom for womenfolk are rarely available at the chemists' shop. Neither, it is distributed free of cost at the health centers.

This news article brings hope as well as despair. The hope that it brings is that when a male partner refuses to wear a condom or is drunk or abusive female condoms if made available can protect women folks to a great extent. Besides, the female condom might help protect them from unwanted pregnancies. But the point to be worried is that the 'cost factor' of the product might be a hindrance at this condom being available to rural women folks. Besides, availability would be another impending factor, which might hinder the regular usage of the condom by the women folks.

"Dear students have safe sex: Condom machine at your door" (TOI, Dec 19, 2005). These articles spoke of condom vending machines being instilled by the AIDS control Society Delhi. This was a very noble venture at popularizing condoms among the youths in JNU and DU campuses. Besides condoms, the literature on HIV/AIDS and chocolates and other commodities were made available at these centers. This concept, although noble and innovative, is worth emulating by other State AIDS Control Societies as well. But, the researcher feels that this might have a negative repercussion on young adolescents. Although, making literature on HIV/AIDS available to the students would go a long way in removing misconceptions on HIV/AIDS. However, making condoms available to the students would instigate them to experiment with sex. However, *The Assam Tribune* or *The Asomiya Pratidin* did not publish articles/ news stories that went to promote condom or safe sex behavior issue to its readers.

Stories that reported medical breakthrough/ research study/ cure and alternative therapies were published by all the English dailies. *The Times of India* had published two soft stories on **"Medical"** discourse that are worth mentioning here- (1) **"Circumcision Prevents HIV? Govt. Keeps Mum": Ministry buries international reports in fear of making up communal harmony"** (5/8/05 TOI) and **"HIV virus is Becoming Less Aggressive: Study"** (30/9/2005, TOI).

The former news article emphasizes that the fear of racking up a communal controversy in India has made the health ministry keep mum about an international study, which suggested that circumcised men were less prone to HIV infection. The above-mentioned study was conducted by France's National AIDS Research Agency in South Africa between 2002 and 2005. The study which was made public on July 26, 2005, at the Third International AIDs Conference on HIV treatment in Rio de Jenario, had revealed that HIV rates among those not circumcised were 2 to 8 times higher than in those groups that do not practice circumcision.

The news story dwells upon the fact that the study might have a significant bearing on the country's AIDS prevention programme. However, the Indian government was keeping a distance from acknowledging it. The article presented a predicament situation. Although circumcision is a hygienic practice, its association with Islam would hinder its endorsement in the Indian context. The article further mentions that over 25 percent of people were going for circumcision for protecting against AIDS. This story endorses the predicament expressed by senior health officials who feel that subscribing to the study would amount to scathing criticism by the Hindus. On the other hand, by accepting it would mean the bulk of the Muslim population entertain the notion that they can be safe with unprotected sex. To bring home this point, the article has cited the figures of Muslim countries where circumcision was prevalent, had a very low number of AIDS patients. For instance, in India, 0.92 percent of the adult population is HIV positive. While the figure stands to only 0.1 percent in Iran, Indonesia and Pakistan, 0.2 percent in Bangladesh and 0.4 percent in Malaysia. In fine, if we were to subscribe to the views expressed in the article in favor of circumcision, we must certainly understand that circumcision of men cannot protect the women and children from getting infected. At present more than 40 percent of all AIDS patients are women. And we must also understand that the infected mothers are likely to pass on the virus to their offsprings. Thus, both Muslims and Hindus are equally vulnerable irrespective of whether they go for circumcision or not. Undoubtedly circumcision has its merits, but the article sums up the discourse with a note of caution that at present, at least three more studies are underway to confirm the effectiveness of circumcision.

The later news story speaks of a study conducted by researchers at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, Belgium. The essence of the study, put in layman's language, was that the HIV virus is weakening and maybe in another fifty or 100 years, it will adapt to living with its human host and may cause less impact. The study had been published in 'AIDS' the official journal of The International AIDS Society.

The implications of this study, if found to be true, could be immense rejoice for the poor and developing countries like India which have more pressing problems to address immediately than spend valuable foreign exchange in buying costly anti-retroviral. The article also speaks of an AIIMS study that had found that HIV infected Indians were more likely to contract AIDS than their counterparts in the West because the

Indians were suspected to possess certain genes that would hasten the progression of the disease in their body. The researcher feels that an important adverse impact of the study would amount to lulling the government and the people into a false sense of security, at least in the present context when AIDS is spreading like a wildfire across the globe. Towards the end, the author of the piece quotes the former WHO HIV expert, Dr. Harco Vitoria, who said that it was too early to assume that the HIV virus is going to behave the same way as syphilis, which killed large numbers of people in the sixteenth century, but nowadays, it takes 40 to 50 years to affect someone. The study holds water in the sense that the HIV virus was going through adaptation and in days to come positive can be expected of the HIV.

Other discourses on the broad aspect of the MEDICAL theme are worth mentioning. Take, for instance, the news item-**Ethics cloud on HIV vaccine trials** (published on the TOI, 10/2/2005). This article was a soft news story, which starts with questioning, "if volunteers for the preventive HIV/AIDS vaccine start testing positive as a result of the antibodies produced by the vaccine, will it affect their future lives?" "It also poses another serious question-if any of them were to get infected as a result of the known causes of infection, do they get support and treatment all through their life?" This was the pack of apprehension expressed by the author of the piece as the first phase of human trials of the preventive AIDS vaccine takes off in India that opened a discussion on the moral and ethical challenges posed by AIDS vaccine trials. This article was a timely write- up expressing doubts and dissecting threadbare the pros and cons with respect to HIV/AIDS vaccine trials. The writer further says that some of the ethical challenges will get unfolded only as the trials progress and get into the second and third phases.

To elucidate the point the author goes on to present the views of experts on either side of the camp. One such view was expressed by L.M.Nath, an epidemiologist and expert on HIV/AIDS, who says that the volunteers who are not HIV infected may always test positive for antibodies to the virus once the vaccine has been injected. And this may create problems of discrimination in insurance, travel, jobs, and housing etc. On the other hand, senior officials at the Indian Council of Medical Research claim that these concerns had been addressed and each participant would be given a certificate that would differentiate whether it is vaccine-induced antibodies or HIV infection-induced antibodies. However, experts like Nath were skeptical of whether the certificates would be recognized globally. The story presented the views of Mr. Sanjay Mahendate, the then Deputy Director of the National AIDS Research Institute who said that social risks and harms to the participants should be monitored as seriously as physical harm. The paradox elucidated in the article was that the volunteers were urged to indulge in high-risk behavior by banking on the vaccine. Yet researchers would not come to know of the results of the vaccine until some of the volunteers ventured to take behavior and get infected.

News stories on the **Stigma / Discrimination** subcategory were also given considerable print space by the newspapers under study –**"AIDS Scare; Discrimination with the Doctors"** (18/2/2005, TOI). This article speaks of the pain and agony of the people living with AIDS (PLWAs). It spoke of how the PLWAs were humiliated even by doctors who are supposed to treat all the patients equally without fear or favor. They should be at the vanguard at removing the misconceptions associated with HIV/AIDS. Humiliation was borne more by the women folks who were tested positive. The victims were often asked whether their husband was a lorry driver! Another HIV positive patient who is a government employee feels that his workplace and his colleagues were no longer the same. The once-routine 'handshakes' had become fewer for him. Another HIV infected person, this time a woman, was given a dingy separate room to stay in the hospital and the nurse on duty did not turn up to her even once.

Articles that were **Challenging Stigma/Discrimination** are also worth mentioning in this context. With the stigma and discrimination attached with the issue of HIV/AIDS and the urgency to contribute to prevention, care and treatment, an NGO of PLWAs (North East India Harm Reduction Network) decide to take up the fight against AIDS to Parliament. The article speaks that People Living with AIDS (PLWAs) should be proactive in removing myths and misconceptions regarding HIV/AIDS. The convention organized by the PLWAs emphasized on the need to formulate policies by the government and private sectors to safeguard the rights of the victims. The article further dwelt upon the fact that PLWAs and NGOs of the North East even lobbied to demand free anti-retroviral to the PLWAs of the North East. The article also spoke of the need for better food habits for the patients, yoga, and meditation, which would revive the immune system of the patients. The article also dwelt with the problems of stigma and discrimination encountered by the patients with respect to access to health care facilities in the government and the private sector. Another extremely encouraging article was **"Be Positive with HIV: Shilpa"** (32/4/2005, TOI). This article spoke of Bollywood stars' congregation at Shillong on a three-day AIDS awareness campaign organized by the Assam Rifles Wives' Welfare Association. Shilpa Shetty, one of the star attractions of the show, who had also starred in

aAIDs themed movie “*PhirMilenge*”, urged the people that one should be positive even when one is HIV positive. She entreated people not to shun away HIV positive people. She reiterated the fact that this virus was spreading rapidly because people shun HIV positives away. The article exhorted people, in general, to do their bit to spread awareness about the disease.

The Assam Tribune published three news stories that had “medical” discourse as the main theme of the news item. They were – “**Prenatal and Neonatal HIV**” (July 12, 2005). “**HIV virus in human eyes**” (July 28, 2005), “**Doctor claims encouraging results for anti-AIDS drugs**”. (December 11, 2005).

Whereas, *The Sentinel* had published four news stories revolving around the **medical** themes. They were – An Editorial published on February 26, 2005 – “**More Drugs better for protecting baby from HIV**”. Another Editorial piece published on March 14, 2005, titled – “**AIDS pioneer calls for therapeutic Vaccine**”. Another article was a piece of hard news titled – “**China begins human trials of AIDS Vaccine**”. (Sentinel March 14, 2005). The last was another soft news story titled “**China AIDS victims fights bad drugs, ineptitude**” (4th July 2005).

The Asomiya Pratidin did not publish anything under the heading “medical”. It published only two soft news stories “**Beggars are spreading incurable disease in the city**” (June 2, 2005) and “**Lakhs of AIDS victims in India**” (August 29, 2005). The frame of the discourse of the former article was “**Govt. Denouncing**” and of the later was the “**AIDS prevention initiative**”.

The number of Editorials published the respective newspapers reflects the level of importance accorded by the newspapers to the issue of HIV/AIDS. It was found from the study that *The Times of India* and *The Asomiya Pratidin* did not publish any ‘editorial’ on HIV/AIDS issues during the selected time frame. But, *The Assam Tribune* had published three Editorials on HIV/AIDS issues. Similarly, *The Sentinel* had also published three Editorials on HIV/AIDS.

‘Letters to Editor’ is a very important feedback mechanism employed by the newspapers. This section acts as a ventilator between the readers and the policymakers at the helm of affairs. However, considering the vulnerability of the region to high-risk prevalent states, it was shocking to find that there were no letters to the editors in the entire year in all the sampled newspapers. Thus in general, the sampled newspapers were to a great extent unable to give the readers food for thought or adequate information on the magnitude of HIV/AIDS pandemic.

It is rightly said that a picture can tell a thousand stories. Photography, infographics, logo, cartoons etc. have their own appeal to the readers and they cannot be ignored. It was found that *The Times of India* fared well among the other selected newspapers when it came to giving illustrations or infographics and presentation of news items on AIDS. *The Times of India* either used graphics of AIDS symbol or AIDS logo to illustrate its reports. Altogether it published seven graphics in the entire year along with news. But sadly enough it did not publish any Public Service Advertisement (PSA) on HIV/AIDS issues.

The Assam Tribune published one photograph of an AIDS Seminar under progress on 1st January 2005. Another photograph was published on October 16, 2005. During the entire year, *The Assam Tribune* had published three numbers of Public Service Advertisements (PSA) on AIDS: one was published in color at the last page of *The Assam Tribune* (June 26, 2005). However, the other two PSA was in black and white and they were placed in the inside pages of the newspaper.

However, *The Sentinel* did not publish any photographs or infographics on HIV/AIDS. It published three PSA during the whole year under study. A noteworthy point is that it gave maximum print space on PSA among all the newspapers under study (2075 columns).

The Asomiya Pratidin falls behind in this matter. Most of the news items on HIV/AIDS by the selected newspapers were relegated to the inside pages. Placement of the article on a particular page in the newspaper carries a lot of meaning. In the present times, the newspaper reading habit of the people is fast dwindling due to a constraint of time and a busy schedule of life. In such a scenario, people usually scan the newspaper's front page for primary news stories. So the placement of AIDS news on the first or last page or editorial page reflects a lot of weight accorded by the newspaper.

It was found from the study that *The Times of India* did not publish any news items on its front or cover page. Likewise, there were no articles on the last page, which also carries a lot of significance with respect to the placement of news items. Similarly, there were no news items on AIDS placed on the Editorial page of *The Times of India*. Most of the news items were relegated to Inside Pages. From this, we can infer the kind of significance accorded by *The Times of India* with respect to the news on HIV/AIDS.

Similarly, *The Assam Tribune* also did not accord Front-Page placement to any news items on HIV/AIDS. It mostly placed news on AIDS in the Inside Pages. However, there was one PSA published on the Last Page. There was also news items placed on the Editorial Page, which is an indication of the significance accorded to the news on HIV/AIDS by the *Assam Tribune*.

However, *The Sentinel* placed two news items on its Front Page. Besides it also preferred the Editorial Page to publish news on HIV/AIDS. Another noteworthy point about *The Sentinel* is that it had published two feature stories on AIDS in its supplement, - *The Saturday Fare*. On 1 January, 2005 issue of *The Saturday Fare*, it published a soft story "**Living positively despite HIV**", measuring 553 Column centimeters in its tabloid-sized Saturday supplement. The main theme of the discourse of this article was "**challenging Stigma/Discrimination**". Again, on April 23, 2005, issue of *The Saturday Fare*, another feature was published on the Front Page, covering one full page of the Tabloid sized supplement. "**It was a profile on Jahnavi Goswami**". Mrs. Goswami is an HIV positive woman who is at the vanguard of people living with AIDS, working for the uplift of HIV/AIDS patients of the State. This feature can be attributed to a success story. Such success stories send a positive signal to other HIV/AIDS patients to come forward to claim their rightful place in society.

Comparison of Regional Language and English Press:

The study, though not an exhaustive one, shows that there were more articles on HIV/AIDS in the English Press in Assam as compared to the Assamese language Press. While this is partly because more English papers (four) were selected than Assamese language papers (one).

Nonetheless, a detailed look at the coverage of the Regional English Press reveals that the major issues it took up were focused on HIV/AIDS prevention interventions and the spread of the epidemic. 68 of the 78 articles had a neutral tone since more of the stories were based on Press Conference, or government releases or were event – oriented reports of workshops, training, seminar, events or camps. Four stories had a **negative tone**. For instance, an article on the street beggars at the temples of the Guwahati city described them as carriers of the virus and several incurable diseases; another article on '**China's migrant workers a high AIDS risk**' (*The Sentinel*: 10 June 2005). This article attributed an increase in STDs and HIV in the metropolitan provinces of China due to the influx of migrant workers from the countryside. These articles falsely distance the virus from other segments, whereas the epidemic does not discriminate between rich and poor. It seemed these kinds of stories still leveled the blame for spreading the virus on particular segments of the population like migrant workers, truck drivers, women etc. Such articles might carry covert elements of stigma and discrimination and tend to perpetuate the notion that HIV/AIDS is an epidemic of the poor and uneducated.

The rest of the news items were **positive** reports like the stories in *The Sentinel* titled, "**Centre to Introduce Female Condom**", "**China begins human trials of AIDS vaccines**", and in *The Assam Tribune* titled "**Doctors claims encouraging results for Anti-AIDS drugs**", and in *The Times of India*, "**NGO takes to fight against AIDS to Parliament**".

A majority of the news articles in *The Times of India* were informative and analytical, providing a perspective. They were better displayed with graphics and AIDS logo which go a long way for the ordinary reader to get attracted to read that piece of the news story.

The study has found that the coverage of AIDS in the print media of Assam was abysmally low. Most health coverage is treated as hard news or events based news only. For instance, there is a rise on coverage of AIDS news on Dec1 as it is World AIDS Day. In such news stories there more focus on personalities, especially politicians and government officials inaugurating some seminar or workshop, rather than issues, analysis, and educative news information. There is also little effort to analyze health issues that have a bearing on the larger context of developmental problems such as economic, sociological and human resource development. It is thus evident that the Press in Assam continues to confine its coverage of HIV/AIDS to reports dealing with hard news. The few reports that are published are in the nature of the announcement of events like a seminar on AIDS, workshops etc., which are basically 'event-oriented'. They do not contribute anything to the reader's knowledge on the issue. Articles should educate people to change their attitude on HIV/AIDS; it should dispel myths and misconceptions on AIDS. It should remove stigmas associated with the disease.

It is very unfortunate that not a single newspaper studied for a year deemed the cause of AIDS awareness important enough to carry a series of articles on various aspects of the issue. Thereby social, political, economic, behavioral ethical, emotional, familial and human rights issues mostly remained sidelined in the coverage of AIDS issues in the sample newspapers.

Conclusion

The Press can create or limit public interest. It can be instrumental in placing such issues on the public agenda and thereby mobilize will power and physical resources to combat the invasion of an epidemic such as AIDS which calls for co-operation from people of all stratus of society. However, most of the media

highlights of the HIV/AIDS issues were event centered. Only in the event of a major disaster or visiting minister to inaugurate a conference on HIV/AIDS there would be coverage. There is a spate of articles on HIV/AIDS in the regional and national print media. The Press in India, particularly in Assam has not yet attempted to shoulder the responsibility of spreading awareness on HIV/AIDS.

A cursory look at the history of the Indian Press would show that it had played a crucial role in articulating the voices of the nation during the freedom struggle. But today there seems to be complacency on the part of the Press. It has given itself completely to crass commercialization. It has become fatigued with HIV/AIDS issues. There has to be a resurrection of the Indian Press to take up the issue of HIV/AIDS to save humanity from total extinction.

Mass media is like a beam of searchlight which moves restlessly about bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. It is also equally true that newspapers/news reports have a brief attention span. And also by withholding attention from an issue, the media can leave it in the dark. So whether or not an issue can be put on the public agenda of a country depends on how the media of a country sets its agenda to cover a particular issue. This is because in most cases public agenda follows media. But whether or not, this is successful in effecting a policy change depends to a great extent on how the media selects an issue, defines it, presents it and prepares the ground for discussion. It is here that media advocacy plays a crucial role in media advocacy's purpose is to contribute to the development and implantation of social and policy initiatives that promote health and wellbeing. This purpose if implemented effectively is a good portent not only for AIDS but also for any health and social issue.

Apart from media advocacy, there is an urgent need for sensitivity in the training of journalists and media executives so that issues of and surrounding HIV/AIDS are correctly and truly presented. If this can be done the stigma and discrimination associated with AIDS can be minimized to a considerable extent.

Media experts all over the globe are of the view that effective media coverage can humanize and localize the HIV/AIDS issue, and spur public discourse, which in turn, will promote the government to prioritize HIV/AIDS issues into the country's social and political agenda. Media content shapes beliefs about the disease and influences response from governments and public attitudes towards the PLWAs. It can advocate accountability and responsibility and help the people to raise their voices.

The print media of Assam can render yeoman's services. It can report HIV cases hidden in the remote parts of the country and expose the kind of medical services provided by the hospitals and health centers. More importantly, it can give a human face to the issue of HIV/AIDS. However, experts are critical of media coverage of HIV/AIDS. Dipankar De Sarkar of *Panos Features*, London (in Yesterday's News, HIV and Print Media) comments that much of the media coverage of AIDS these days is "about what governments, donors and UN agencies say and do, with an overarching emphasis on aid dollars. Dull crammed with figures, reading like press releases, drafted by some faceless AIDS bureaucrats, these news stories can range from a visiting western minister talking about HIV to bilateral aid agreements with a wealthy donor nation to the launch of a new report on AIDS by an international agency. Almost always, there will be one notable absentee in these stories. It is the old familiar, the voices of the poor and those living with AIDS. But no one seems to mind. Pharmaceutical Companies, donor agencies, governments, even well-meaning NGOs appear to be quite content so long as their names and agendas appear in print".

This research is a timely attempt to cross-examine the role of the print media in Assam to battle the scourge confronting humans. The researcher feels that the print media in Assam have not fully realized their responsibility for the prevention, care, and treatment of the disease. The study of the print media in Assam revealed that a number of gaps exist which hinders them from effectively playing a role to spread awareness against HIV/AIDS. It was found that the print media of Assam lacked depth and there was little investigative reporting on HIV/AIDS. The reporter and correspondents working from rural areas lacked adequate knowledge on the issue. This was reflected by the fact there was less number of soft news like features, profiles, write-ups, etc., on HIV/AIDS. What they mostly reported was event-oriented hard news. They concentrated more on reporting inauguration, speech by dignitaries, seminars and conferences on HIV/AIDS. What can an ordinary reader/student learn from these news reports? They did not mention much on safe sex behavior, safe blood transfusion, safe pre, and post-natal health practices, etc. The news items also rarely advocated sex education among school and college going adolescents. Neither had they promoted condom usage nor sterilized syringes and medical equipment.

Likewise, they have failed to include the views/fears and apprehensions of the infected and high-risk people. The marginalized were left out, as the reporters lacked a sociological perspective on the issue, most of their reports failed to deal with the role of gender in the spread of the disease. Though HIV/AIDS can affect everyone, it is often the poor, youth and women in distress who are most vulnerable.

In the absence of a vaccine, the social vaccine of education and awareness is the only preventive tool against HIV/AIDS. Hence, it is appropriately said that prevention begins with information. Print media, which conveys information and mold public opinion, must remain at the vanguard of an AIDS awareness campaign to help people make informed choices.

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