



ELECTRONIC RESOURCES FOR MEDIA ON HIV/AIDS

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Communicating effectively about HIV/AIDS on the local level is a pressing need in most countries, and the Internet presents innovative new opportunities to support this communication. But how are international organisations and donors approaching this area of e-resourcing? What resources are being produced and placed online, and how effective are they? This article seeks to present the case for more reflection and coordination in resourcing local communicators via the Internet. There are lessons to be shared about how to maximize Internet's potential to deliver communication resources and what pitfalls to avoid.

There is a limited number of training opportunities compared to the number of radio stations and other media outlets emerging in the developing world, and therefore only a minority of people working in print or broadcast in developing countries can access international NGO media training, or be part of a communication project. But nearly all can access the Internet, even if only at an Internet café (Gerster, 2003). There are definitely challenges in access and accessibility, but the Internet as a distribution medium now certainly exists, and gives rise to the following questions: how can it help meet the needs of local media as regards HIV/AIDS? And what are international organisations doing in terms of populating this medium with useful resources for HIV and AIDS communication?

Many international NGOs have recognised the potential of the online sphere for extending traditional communication projects, as well as for developing new approaches, such as providing resources for communications online (SAfAIDS, 2005).

However, an increasing number of electronic resources are being developed without sufficient knowledge of what else is available, and without sufficiently taking the needs of local media into account.

This situation presents NGOs and other policy makers with an imperative to share learning and to collaborate around HIV/AIDS communication e-

ISSUE 4
June 2006

resourcing in order to maximize this avenue of media support (OneWorld, 2004).

There is also a need to rationalize e-resourcing in order not to squander the decreasing amounts of funding for this area. Since the mid 90s, ICT projects have been popular with financers, but as international NGOs struggle to make the case for ICT impact, donors are increasingly demonstrating fatigue in funding technology-driven initiatives, even those focused on HIV/AIDS (Chetley, 2005).

ONLINE RESOURCES

The development of online resources for journalists is part of a general trend in online information provision in development; web portals, websites and online databases are a popular route for delivering and developing communication projects as well as for distributing institutional publicity (Gumucio-Dagron, 2003).

Providing communicators with content and training resources has long been a core aspect of communication projects, and online resources in this field are largely an extension of this style of resourcing, thus taking on many of the existing characteristics of strategies in media support (Singhal et al., 2003).

The effectiveness of e-resources for HIV/AIDS communication has not been comprehensively analysed, and it is timely to question the future direction of online information provision to avoid duplication of efforts or wasted resources. The effectiveness of ICTs and the use of the online space for providing resources to communicators at the local level is an under-researched and largely undocumented area. Monitoring the consumption of these online resources is generally beyond the scope of most project-evaluation efforts, and therefore the effectiveness of resources in this context is difficult to gauge.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNICATORS

In the communication battle against HIV/AIDS, local media play a crucial role, since they reach local audiences in their own language and within a shared cultural context. Research shows that many social factors and agents condition behaviour change, the local media being one of the most significant ones (Myers, 2004). Local media (i.e. TV, radio and print; public, state, commercial and community media) and other

communicators at the local level -such as health workers, health NGOs and ministries- all play their role in informing and educating audiences. However, local media face many challenges in terms of capacity, knowledge and practical and thematic HIV/AIDS resources.

LOCAL MEDIA NEEDS

Communicators at the grassroots level, and often nationally, require many resources for understanding HIV/AIDS and producing accurate content that has an impact on their audiences. These needs include understanding the science and language of AIDS; accessing credible sources of information; collaborating with information providers; and developing their own excellent AIDS content based on high production standards and good participatory media skills.

The information required by the media for effective HIV/AIDS communication range from basic data to detailed analyses about specific topics within the overall issue (Singhal et al., 2003). Without the basic accurate verifiable and trustworthy 'facts', communicators are liable to make mistakes. Such mistakes are particularly serious, since in HIV/AIDS misinformation can have detrimental effects. In this context, access to basic information and help in understanding the 'facts' are vital.

Besides the need for understanding the basics, the science and scientific language of HIV/AIDS, there is also a need for understanding new research, particularly the research linked to treatment (Nocuze, 2004). It is also important to understand HIV/AIDS as a social and development issue that is complex. Such an understanding gives rise to more awareness about human interest reporting, a style of coverage to which many audiences respond.

Local media play a key role as intermediaries translating the language of HIV/AIDS –with its western, scientific, development-jargoned character- into communication that is clear and accessible for local people, often speaking different languages and living in very varied contexts (Interviews, 2005). Resources that aid media in translating are vital: both actual translation from one language –often English- to another, and also 'translating' or interpreting the convoluted inaccessible scientific lingo into something simple and clearly understandable. There is also a need to learn about the importance of appropriate language in terms of finding words that are culturally acceptable and which do not stigmatize or discriminate (WHO, 2004).

There is a need for resources to present content in ways accessible and

acceptable for audiences, using appropriate language and methods. Factors important in this sense are the sexual content and subtext in HIV/AIDS communication, as well as the medic-scientific character of much of the HIV/AIDS information (Interviews, 2005). Knowing how to speak about AIDS and sex in a way that is not salacious, but effective and accurate, is a skill that must be learnt (Singhal et al., 2003). There is value in learning from other people's experience of becoming sensitized to appropriate language, and how to communicate sensitive issues using effective communication strategies and adopting best practices in terms of radio, TV and print production.

Gaining access to up-to-date information about HIV and AIDS is another need. Finding good sources of information that provide news and data in digestible and trustworthy forms is essential for good reporting. The main sources of information for local media tend to be governmental, health authorities, NGOs and 'local' official voices, i.e. local experts, society leaders and community spokespersons. Using international sources to access statistics and worldwide data is also important. International sources are often used for double-checking facts and views that have been generated locally (Interviews, 2005).

There is a need for resources that contribute to developing media production skills in general and HIV/AIDS-related production skills specifically. This has been a major focus of media support activities by international and national organisations for many years, and with the advent of ICTs there is now the additional opportunity to put some of these capacity-building resources online for wider distribution (Chetley, 2005).

There is a need to learn current methods of broadcast programming for HIV/AIDS communication, including less 'scientific' formats and more human-interest coverage. These needs are clear to many local media trainers. Paul Kavuma, who trains local media in Uganda, said:

"If you listen to radio stations in Uganda, you're going to listen for the features –and there are hardly any. So, if I can listen to some features that I find on a certain website, then that's good for me. Or maybe I feel that our public service announcements are too direct or boring, there's this whole concept of 'infotainment', and I'm wondering how do I really make it interesting but still relevant, and how do I make it stick. You'll go and hope to get some examples from people who are in situations that are close to yours –listen to something from Zambia or Zimbabwe, etc., you're bound to like it. So, of course it's very important in terms of the formats as well" (Interviews, 2005).

INFORMATION SOURCES

Sources on HIV/AIDS range from official to non-official, partisan to neutral, and local to international. Official sources include government and national authorities. The ease of access to these sources depends on the local circumstances. However, with an increasing number of official statistics and data available online, the Internet does often provide a useful alternative to the often time-consuming route of visiting national authorities and trying to reach the correct person to obtain the information required. Ironically, it can sometimes be quicker and easier to find information online via an international intermediary (such as a leading newspaper or UN agency) because international media sometimes have better access to the national authorities than the local media has in developing countries (Interviews, 2005).

E-resources that can be trusted and that are vetted and verifiable are of great value to a great many media practitioners around the world. Local media need trustworthy data upon which to build reports and human interest stories. Reporting on HIV/AIDS within the local context should be appropriate to that context, but by the same token it should also be accurate.

In many cases, international organisations and agencies may be able to provide more HIV and AIDS information than available locally, and more authoritative information that is less influenced by local political and/or social censorship. But HIV/AIDS content provided by international NGOs should not be viewed as intrinsically 'neutral'; it is the product of their own contexts and sets of organisational strategic assumptions. International sources may also present local media with useful best practices content, highlighting what other communicators have done in campaigns and reports on HIV/AIDS (UNESCO/UNAIDS, 2001).

There is a need for international content to 'supplement' local or traditional sources of information. The challenge in HIV/AIDS e-resourcing for media is to make ICT-enabled communications more of a service and integrate it with local 'off-line' communication, not something imposed from outside that will challenge local ideas, thus resulting in less effective advocacy and behaviour change.

The potential impact of western-designed e-resources 'competing' with local communications needs to be understood and mitigated by emphasising context in the usage of e-resources. It is highly problematic to have generic and possibly politicized international content swamping local communication sources and data, and giving contradictory messages (OneWorld, 2004).

On the other hand, the technology presents an opportunity for local communication to use it as well. As Manuel Castells outlines, the Internet can play a powerful new role (Castells, 2000).

THE ISSUE OF CREDIBILITY AND TRUST

Because of the highly contentious nature of the issue of HIV/AIDS in many contexts, credibility and trustworthiness of content and sources is very important.

HIV/AIDS information content and sources are vulnerable to being politicized. Governments, international organisations and local religious and cultural authorities influence information and shape it to their own ends. For example, governments underplaying infections and casting doubt on the medical realities of transmission, or authorities emphasising socially acceptable strategies for prevention over strategies that they view as inappropriate (the debate about condoms and behaviour change strategies such as ABC –Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms) (Scalway, 2003).

Media need to trust that the information they are finding is accurate and trustworthy, but there are few mechanisms for them to judge the trustworthiness of basic AIDS information on the Net; and this is one of the main challenges of e-resources.

A quick search on the net using HIV and AIDS as keywords yields thousands of pages of content, some very detailed, some untrustworthy, and most not targeted at media who require specific content –simple, well-written and accurate. Trust in sources of information is important in all contexts, but particularly in developing and transitional countries, where confidence in official information has been eroded by political history.

For effective HIV/AIDS communication, audiences need to trust the information they are given, and media need to trust their sources. Additionally, sources need to trust the media to have the capacity and integrity to convey the information provided in a responsible and accurate manner. In a context where there are not many readily accessible sources of information, there is still suspicion about various information sources.

Not everyone who wants or needs training can receive it, since international and national organisations that provide it cannot serve all local media, especially because the burgeoning independent media sector in both developing and transitional countries means that there are increasing numbers of communicators producing content.

Effective communication depends on the media having the necessary production and strategic skills to generate quality outputs, whether for broadcast or print: "Journalists should be trained in HIV/AIDS reporting to widen their knowledge about the subject as well as improve their skills in packaging the stories in a competitive, persuasive and effective way" (UNESCO/UNAIDS, 2001). Media training is a long-established field in development communications, and HIV/AIDS media training is an extensive field within it.

However, since few local media personnel are able to attend such trainings, they are dependant on accessing training resources by themselves. In this context, the Internet presents potential trainees with more options than may have existed before. The Internet provides an additional distribution opportunity for national information providers (for example NGOs and national Aids Councils who wish to link up to rural telecenters, schools or other 'nodes' of ICT access in remote areas that are serving local communities).

Skills that the local media require for effective HIV/AIDS communication are dependant on the media medium they use (i.e. radio, TV, print), and are conditioned by the level of organisational wealth, infrastructure and resources. Basic media skills are an obvious area of capacity development, and resources published online are aimed at partially addressing these needs. For example, the partnership based shared-training portal *Itrainonline* administered by APC, *Bellanet*, *OneWorld* and others.

Production skills that are more thematic, for instance still in addressing the theme of children and AIDS through innovative child-centered media strategies, include an understanding of the use of effective formats and the balance between current affairs reporting and human-interest stories. Updating strategies for broadcast and print formats is an area of innovation in health reporting. Edutainment (entertainment with an educational aim) is an important development in communications theory, and local media should have access to learning and examples of this and other strategies. Local theatre and radio drama are established strategies in many developing countries, and often the application of theories into the field takes place through local media innovation. E-resources offer various ways to bridge theory and practice by sharing ideas and

innovations, for example via communication strategy portals such as *The Communication Initiative*.

There is a lack of specialised health reporting, and HIV AIDS coverage specifically, in many countries' local media (Interviews, 2005). While a number of international media support and training programmes exist to try to address this lack, many media personnel do not have access to these international projects. The individual journalist or community media volunteer often has to develop his or her skills independently, accessing resources when and how they can, depending on their knowledge of what resources exist and how to access them. They are also dependent on the goodwill of editors/managers to prioritise this area -gatekeepers themselves who require capacity development resources about HIV and AIDS (Gething, 2003).

'STRATEGY' RESOURCES

Quality outputs need to engage audiences. Accessing good content produced around the world is a good way to learn more about strategies for effective engagement of listeners, viewers and readers. The Internet presents many new opportunities for this type of sharing and learning. There is a role for e-resources to provide inspiring examples of more strategic approaches to information provision and communication support for journalists.

For media personnel who wish to learn more about HIV/AIDS communication strategies and good examples, there is a wide range of resources available, including peer studies and examples of how local media have led AIDS communication interventions within their own communities around the world. A number of organisations and alliances have recognised the opportunity that ICTs present to share knowledge and best practice on HIV/AIDS communication, and created portals for sharing multimedia best practice audio, video and text. These include the *Aids Media Center*, *OneWorld Radio and TV*, and *The Communication Initiative*.

Most resources aimed at the media focus on content. There is a gap in support materials focusing on the relationship between communicators and audiences and on the factors influencing how audiences receive AIDS communication. Resources that inform and prepare the media to understand and target their audiences more effectively would be highly valuable; for instance, tools for audience research, monitoring and evaluation, and targeting AIDS information.

Strategic resources about how to work effectively with information providers -the NGOs, international organisations, local health bodies and government- should also be more widely available. There is a pressing need for shared learning about effective collaboration strategies for NGOs and media to work together in a sustainable way while developing media capacity in AIDS communication. Resources that can aid both media and AIDS organisations -international, regional and local- to work together more effectively are highly valuable.

Much AIDS communication e-resource material is about information and contents, with not enough on resourcing media on 'how' to be more effective in their particular context –be it radio, TV, community media, public broadcasting, etc.

KNOWLEDGE OF E-RESOURCES

Due to the lack of research about the usage of HIV/AIDS communication e-resources, it is difficult to make authorized statements about the level of knowledge and usage. However, there is anecdotal evidence, as well as some impact analysis that points to a situation where local media are not strongly engaged with e-resources, and knowledge of the various online information resources is limited (Interviews, 2005). User statistics for HIV/AIDS information websites indicate that usage is not as strong as anticipated or desired by the developers of the content, but that it is growing (OneWorld, 2003).

Reasons for this limited usage require further research, but it seems clear that many local media do not know what is available. In a recent study of local media in Uganda and Serbia (Interviews, 2005), the media personnel sample interviewed showed a familiarity with the Internet and openness to using the technology. However, they also showed a lack of knowledge about what e-resources exist for AIDS communicators. They demonstrated a usage pattern of 'googling' for HIV/AIDS information, rather than going directly to resource sites and portals (Interviews, 2005).

There is a wealth of valuable information and content available online, and developing and transitional countries media should be more aware of what is on offer as a starting point to assess what they could find useful. If they do not know about what is available, they are at a disadvantage: they are not accessing a wealth of content designed for their consumption, and the producers of these e-resources are not reaching their target audiences.

RESPONDING APPROPRIATELY TO MEDIA NEEDS

Successful ICT initiatives are usually those that respond to real social needs. In contrast, initiatives where technical and contextual knowledge are disconnected and control is located outside the community, are more likely to fail (Chetley, 2005). While e-resources for HIV/AIDS are trying to address a need, more attention must be paid to innovative ways of applying ICTs to the specific information needs of communities and local groups. That includes focusing on building local skills to encourage the process of local appropriation and reinforcing traditional information communication networks (Chetley, 2005).

Much of the present online HIV/AIDS content from around the world is in English rather than in national or local languages, making Internet literacy a major issue. Because most of the e-resource supply organisations are based in the US or Europe, there is a dominant developed country character to the content. Instead, the designers of these websites and portals should understand the context of usage.

SUPPLEMENTING TRADITIONAL DISTRIBUTION

While ICTs are clearly an important resource for delivering and supplementing AIDS information and analysis, I don't suggest that they replace traditional ways of supporting communicators –for example, the established methods of providing media with publications and printed newsletters that can then inform their subsequent work.

In a study of ICT usage by southern communication partners of Healthlink Worldwide, findings showed that an initial over-enthusiasm for delivering information via ICTs to communicators could have the effect of 'disenfranchising the unconnected'. The shift to electronic media has been challenged even from partners with ICT skills, some of whom have experienced difficulties with website and CD-ROM technology. There is still a need for print material in contexts where telecommunications infrastructure is poor and resources are limited: "The decision to shift from direct provision of print materials was partly based on the assumption that access to electronic communication would increase, with electronic media superseding printed material. This has not happened in all contexts, and the shift in mode of delivery was not sufficiently well considered. Even in the Asia-Pacific region, where electronic communication is generally more advanced than in many African countries, feedback in 2002 from readers of the regional edition of AIDS Action indicated that 93% wanted to continue to receive printed version" (Healthlink, 2004).

In transferring communication resources online, suppliers should be aware of the constraints of usage, as well as the gradual nature of take-up, slowly building each year, but still challenging in many contexts. However, once resources are placed online, there is a clear need to ensure that they become known, that they are responding to real needs and that they are effective and appropriate.

The Internet presently provides the most broad distribution approach available to suppliers of media support and resources in terms of reach, and cost-effective in its global coverage.

There is not a 'one size fits all' solution to resourcing local media in HIV/AIDS communication, but there are many valuable resources focused on key strategies, content and production skill. There is also valuable shared learning about HIV/AIDS communication that would be beneficial if made available to a wide arrange of communicators via all appropriate distribution routes. Resources need to be designed and delivered in a way that takes into account the various contexts and languages that local media are part of around the world.

CONCLUSION

Online resources online should enable local media productions inasmuch as they are providing crucial up-to-date and credible information and data. They should also support local productions by increasing skills and capacity for producing innovative and effective media outputs. Resources should also inspire local productions by presenting best practice example of how others have approached HIV/AIDS.

There needs to be more guidance and signposting to quality online information and content that is credible and supported by as many of the relevant actors in the field as possible.

Many e-resources do already exist, but they must be aggregated and marketed to the media, since there is very little knowledge about them. Available resources include links and sites providing AIDS information, communication strategies, re-usable content and online training resources. It is not sufficient to put content online: that is the easy part. The difficult part is to lead people to this content and keep them coming back regularly. E-resources should be promoted in tandem with printed resources as part of clear distribution strategies –for example, highlighted in a manual of e-resources that can be printed and made available through AIDS councils or information centres and as part of communication trainings.

There is a wealth of valuable information and content available online, and developing and transitional countries media should be more aware of what is on offer in order to then assess what they might use. But if they do not know about what is available, they cannot judge what is useful and what is not for their own HIV/AIDS communication imperatives.

Internet resources

Aids Media Centre <http://www.aidsmedia.org>
Ask Source – ICT and Health bibliography www.asksource.info
Bridges.org www.bridges.org
Catalysing Access to Technology in Africa (CATIA) <http://www.catia.ws>
Digital Opportunities Channel <http://www.digitalopportunity.org>
Global Knowledge Partnership <http://www.globalknowledge.org/>
I Connect <http://www.icconnect-online.org/home>
IICD Case studies <http://www.iicd.org/articles/IICDnews.import2171>
Open Knowledge Network <http://www.openknowledge.net/>
Practical Action (see for radio and HIV/AIDS) www.practicalaction.org
Sustainable ICTs www.sustainableicts.org

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SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2006-05-29



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FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM
ISSN 1654-7985