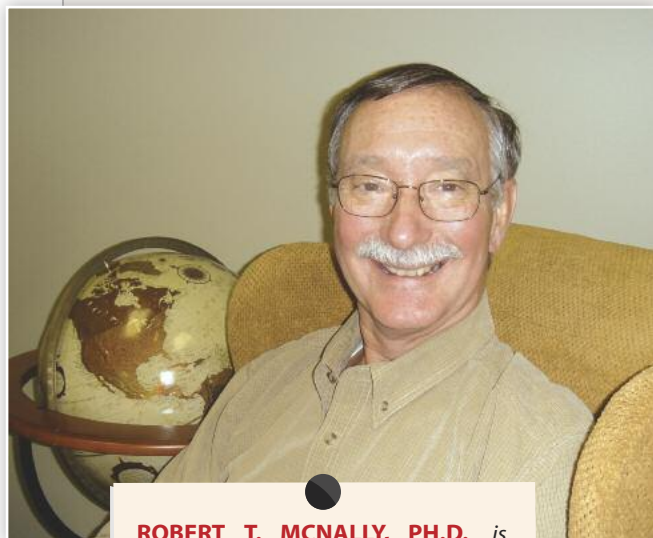




▶ What's Driving the Decline in AIDS News Coverage?



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According to a new study, media coverage of HIV/AIDS fell more than 70% in developed countries over the last two decades. The Trends in Sustainability Project — a joint project of the University of Leeds, Queen's University Belfast, the Berlin-based Institute for Futures Studies and Technology Assessment (IZT), and Euromed Management School in Marseille, France — tracked coverage of a variety of sustainability issues in 115 leading broadsheet newspapers in 41 countries from 1990 until May 2010.

Although it is true that newspaper readership has been steadily eroding over the past decade due to the rise of alternative online news sources, this study is still a powerful indicator of the priority that traditional news organizations assign to various topics.

In the early 1990s, an average of 1.5 articles about HIV/AIDS was found in every issue of these newspapers; since 2008, that average has fallen to less than 0.5.

As the researchers discovered, during the interval under study, coverage of HIV/AIDS peaked at the end of 1991, after which coverage dropped to

values between 0.5 and 1.0 articles per issue from the late 1990s onward — roughly one-third of the levels of coverage observed in the early 1990s. It is striking to note that, among the set of 20 sustainability-related issues studied by the project — ranging from climate change to human rights violations — HIV/AIDS was the only issue that experienced a substantial reduction in levels of public attention through the last 20 years.

As the authors of the study conclude: "A stark decrease of coverage toward the end of the review period can be identified, irrespective of the threat the disease continues to pose."

ACCOUNTING FOR THE DECLINE

What accounts for the decline in newspaper coverage of HIV/AIDS in developed nations?

I believe it is a mix of complacency and ignorance. Consider attitudes in the United States. Segments of the American public think HIV is a non-issue based on the fact that antiretroviral therapy drugs can be effective and provide an extended lifespan to those living with HIV. What they fail to realize is that the current high cost and substantial side effects of these treatments are still problematic, not a long-term solution, and certainly not solutions for developing regions of the globe.

Solid support for this point of view, I believe, comes from a sifting of the media statistics for HIV/AIDS coverage gathered by the sustainability researchers. When the coverage was broken down for six nations — Australia, France, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States — it was found that South African newspapers clearly show the highest coverage levels throughout mid-2000 and 2010, ranging from 1.5 to 2.7 articles per newspaper issue.

Furthermore, South Africa, where HIV is a major crisis, is the only one of the six country subsamples that does not show a marked downward trend over time.

Meanwhile, the decrease in coverage is particularly pronounced in French and U.S.-based newspapers, dropping from around 1.0 to 0.5 and from 1.5 to roughly 0.7 articles per newspaper issue in 2010, respectively. The Australian, French, and U.S.-based newspapers reach their lowest levels of coverage observed throughout the review

HIV/AIDS Drugs

NOVEL TREATMENTS ON THE HORIZON

One hundred new drugs and vaccines are in development to treat HIV/AIDS and related conditions, according to PhRMA, including novel drugs designed to stay ahead of the disease. For example, drugs under development include one that attacks infected cells while leaving healthy cells alone, as well as a new class of drugs designed to prevent the virus from breaking through cell membranes. On the vaccine front, one uses a weakened version of the virus that causes the common cold to boost the immune system, while another is administered via a skin patch.

More than 1 million Americans are living with HIV infection, according to the CDC.

period in 2010; German and U.K.-based newspapers show coverage levels in 2010 that are very close to their overall lowest values in HIV/AIDS-related coverage.

RECONCILING FACTS AND FICTION

The residents of developed nations in 2011 may be tempted to believe the HIV/AIDS crisis is a problem for other parts of the world. Yet this flies in the face of the facts. Note, for example, that in the United States there are 55,000 new HIV infections every year, a number that has remained unchanged since the mid-1990s despite the use of counseling, medications, and protective measures.

Over the last couple of decades, there have been many false hopes and plenty of failures on the road toward a resolution of the HIV crisis. As a result, some doubt a cure or treatment lies on the horizon. These folks are not paying attention to the positive news from clinical studies that shed a very real ray of hope on finding a safe, cheap, universal treatment. These developments include a study in Thailand showing that a certain combination of drugs afforded 31% protection from infection, and ongoing work indicates that vaccines for the treatment of already infected individuals may be possible.

In short, the decline in AIDS news coverage in developed countries reflects neither the ongoing urgency of continued research nor the genuine promise of breakthroughs to come.

A deeper understanding of the current state of the field would result in a level of newspaper coverage similar to that which marked the earlier years of the crisis. **PV**