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Electronic Resources for Media on HIV and AIDS

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Introduction

The past two decades have seen the advent of two significant global developments; the spread of HIV and AIDS, and the creation of the Internet. Both of these factors have had a profound effect on many societies, and both are areas of conflict and controversy.

Electronic resources offer media workers a wide range of information about HIV and AIDS. Websites, online databases, CD-ROMs and email deliver content ranging from statistics to news stories. Online training resources and examples of best practice also aim to support journalists and community media personnel to communicate with their local audiences about HIV and AIDS. But emerging evidence suggests that media workers in developing countries are not taking up the electronic resources that are aimed at them. There is a significant gap between the resources provided and what media workers find useful in their local context.

Information about HIV and AIDS must be credible if it is to have any effect on what people know and how they act. But the Internet delivers a dizzy array of unrestricted content. At the same time the HIV and AIDS discourse has been characterised by significant hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and instances of determined political and social denial

Media that is sensitive to local languages and cultural contexts plays a crucial role in communicating about HIV and AIDS. Research shows that many social factors and agents condition behaviour change, the local media being one of the most significant ones (Myers, 2004). However, local media face challenges in terms of capacity, knowledge and practical and thematic HIV and AIDS resources.

An increasing number of media support organisations – such as UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – are using the Internet to provide information and training resources to media workers in developing countries. These electronic resources, or e-resources, are aimed at assisting media to produce effective communication about HIV and AIDS. But are e-resources relevant, how are they being developed and what factors need to be considered to ensure they are effective? This paper aims to explore these questions by examining the HIV and AIDS communication context for local media, and their information and communication needs. E-resources for HIV and AIDS communication are briefly outlined, and gaps and challenges identified; and finally conclusions and recommendations are presented.

Media needs in HIV/AIDS communication

There is a lack of specialised health reporters in many developing countries. Expertise in HIV and AIDS coverage is particularly scarce (Field Research, Davies 2005). The individual journalist 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. While a number of international media support and training programmes exist to try to

address this lack, the majority of media personnel do not have access to these international projects.

At the same time, independent media is growing. In many African countries, for example, young writers and producers are benefiting from the liberalization of the media. This means that the capacity and information needs of media workers are also growing. Young communicators are dependent on the goodwill of editors and media managers to prioritise HIV and AIDS content – and these traditional 'information gatekeepers' themselves require capacity development resources about HIV and AIDS (Gething, 2003).

Credible sources of information are essential to all media workers. For local media the main sources of information tend to be governmental, health authorities, NGOs and 'local' official voices, such as doctors, society leaders and community spokespersons. But many of these sources shape HIV and AIDS information for their own ends, so media workers need to double check the information. Many background and in-depth HIV and AIDS information resources are not available in print locally This is where accessing resources via the Internet can be particularly useful.

Media workers need clear background information about HIV and AIDS, accessible medical and scientific information, and accurate and current HIV and AIDS news. The information required ranges from basic data to detailed analyses about specific topics within the overall issue (Singhal et al., 2003). In addition to the need for understanding the basic facts about HIV and AIDS, and the scientific language, there is also a need for understanding new research, particularly the research linked to treatment (Nocuze, 2004). Finding good sources of information that provide news and data in digestible and trustworthy forms is essential for good reporting.

As well as credible information, media workers need support with basic journalistic skills, production training and support with communication strategies and knowledge sharing. 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 workers need resources that respond to their specific context and which help them to communicate in that context. Resources that support the process of translation are vital: both actual translation from one language – often English – to another, and also 'translating' or interpreting scientific lingo into clear simple language. There is also a need to learn about the importance of finding words that are culturally acceptable and which do not stigmatise or discriminate (WHO, 2004). Knowing how to speak about HIV and 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 sensitised to appropriate language, and how to communicate sensitive issues using effective communication strategies and adopting best practices in radio, TV and print production.

The media and the Internet

Media workers now know about the Internet and use it although access remains a challenge: many journalists pay for access via an Internet café. The development of online resources for journalists is part of a general trend in online information provision in development; web portals (websites that aggregate and signpost content), websites and online databases are a popular route for delivering and developing communication projects as well as for distributing institutional publicity (Gumucio-Dagron, 2003). Support materials that are delivered via the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) include training, information and networking resources.

Within HIV and AIDS communication, providing communicators with content and training resources has long been a core aspect of communication projects. Online resources in this

field are largely an extension of this style of resourcing, thus taking on many of the characteristics of existing media support strategies (Singhal et al., 2003).

The development of e-resources for HIV and AIDS communication has followed the general development of the Internet; from primarily delivery based models in the first stage of development – with email, websites and web portals predominating, to more interactive models whereby multimedia and social networking features are central. File sharing, video and audio streaming, pod casting, blogging and interactive networking (such as MySpace) are growing, and the convergence of SMS, audio/visuals and text are amplifying 'alternative media', such as IndyMedia. These second stage, or Web 2.0, features have been driven by the explosion of broadband in the North, but even in developing countries online media has been a feature of e-resourcing for over five years.

At present electronic resources are being delivered using most of the online options available. Email remains the main medium, enabling a range of communication services such as e-forums, e-newsletters and free email (via services such as Yahoo and Hotmail). Websites and portals also remain important, especially when featuring more two-way communication mechanisms, such as feedback links, bulletin boards and Q&A services. There is also a small but significant number of interactive e-resources directed at developing country media. UN agencies and international NGOs have been focusing on radio and online audio for developing country media for over ten year. A growing number of projects and services provide audio-sharing and audio listening for best practice learning for radio communicators (for example OneWorld Radio, InterWorld Radio, AMARC, UNESCO's Community Media Centres initiative).

Despite this active development of HIV and AIDS e-resources there appears to be a divide between what is available online and what local media actually access. Research has shown that many media workers in developing and transitional countries (such as Uganda, Kenya and Serbia) demonstrate online search patterns that are predominately dependent on 'googling'. They also demonstrate little awareness of portal sites or other signposting services directing them to recommended HIV and AIDS information online (Field Research, Davies, 2005).

Reliance on the Google search engine means that media workers miss credible content that is targeted at them. A generalised 'google' search pattern for researching HIV and AIDS topics online is potentially dangerous as there is much inaccurate or suspect information online. Search engines do not provide a verification service but simply show the most popular web pages. Searches yield thousands of pages with no clear classification or quality control are not useful research routes. A quick search using HIV and AIDS as keywords yields thousands of pages of content, some very detailed, some untrustworthy, and most not targeted at media workers who require simple, well-written and accurate content.

What are e-resources supplying and where are the gaps?

E-resources provide a range of content about HIV and AIDS. This includes data, statistics, news and scientific information but also content that aims to support training and networking.

Efficient access to data and statistics
Increasingly the internet is providing media workers with an alternative to sourcing information locally. In some instances the internet is a cost effective alternative to the time-consuming route of visiting national authorities and trying to reach the correct person to obtain official statistics and data. 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 (Interview, Nakazibwe. 2005).

Linking local and international knowledge
There is a dichotomy between local and international sources of content. On the one hand local sources (the local hospital or doctor for instance) are preferable as they are likely to

provide information appropriate to the local context. Local sources may, however, be constrained by a range of political and social factors and the information may not be accurate. At the same time international sources are likely to be accurate, but often divorced from local context. Using online international sources to access authoritative information that is less influenced by local political and/or social censorship is useful. But HIV and AIDS content provided by international NGOs should not be viewed as intrinsically 'neutral'; it is the product of their own contexts and assumptions.

Local media workers are best placed to tailor content to their particular context. The Internet is characterised by a predominately western and secular discourse on HIV and AIDS. For societies that are often deeply traditional, patriarchal, religious and hierarchical, this can be problematic. For example, a source or piece of content may advance a position on HIV and AIDS that is not appropriate or welcome in the local context. This is not to judge it, but to acknowledge that many developing countries remain constrained by sexual inequalities, discrimination and taboos that local media need to work around, and work within in many instances.

Verification of sources
People trust sources that have been verified by someone that is trusted. On a local level this is relatively easy to determine; for example a journalist will trust sources on HIV and AIDS suggested by a respected doctor over sources provided by a taxi driver. On an international level verification is not as clear but e-resources on HIV and AIDS from trusted institutions can be used for double-checking facts and views that have been generated locally. For example, media workers use websites such as UNAIDS to check statistics and background information (Field Research, Davies 2005). This is a valuable supplementary role that e-resources for HIV and AIDS can play. Media workers can identify when governments underplay infections and cast doubt on the medical realities of transmission, or when authorities emphasise 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 – is one example (Scalway, 2003).

Networking and sharing best practice
International sources may present local media with useful content about what other communicators have done in campaigns and reports on HIV and AIDS (UNESCO/UNAIDS, 2001). There is a modest but growing number of websites and online resources that link media with other media to share best practice and learning about effective HIV and AIDS communication. Networking websites like OneWorld Radio provide a platform for online audio sharing and listening, and organisations like AMARC are also using online tools for networking broadcasters. Best practice audio and video demonstration portals are also increasing, such as the Aids Media Center. However there is still a primarily 'push' methodology, whereby suppliers are pushing out content and examples of content, with limited opportunities for discussion and peer-to-peer learning.

Media workers wish to learn from each other but the Internet is not yet supporting this sufficiently. "If you listen to radio stations in Uganda," says Paul Kavuma, local media trainer 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…" (Interview, Kavuma, 2005).

Learning from other communicators in similar contexts, or from other media professionals in very different contexts, is an area of valuable interactivity. ICTs have enabled sharing of best practice but a lot more could be done. There could be much more two way networking, sharing thoughts, strategies, examples of work and posing questions for a community of like-minded HIV and AIDS-focused media to respond to. For example within the context of faith based broadcasting Catholic broadcasters could share experiences about how they approach

youth effectively in a catholic context, or radio producers from Muslim stations could network about how they have produced HIV and AIDS content to their audiences.

Training and capacity building
In addition to face to face, training, suppliers are moving into online training. Support for developing production and journalistic skills has been a major focus of media support activities by international and national organisations for many years. 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). Basic media skills are an obvious area of capacity development. Resources published online are aimed at partially addressing this need, for example, the training portal Itrainonline developed in partnership by APC, Bellanet, OneWorld and others

Strategy resources
As well as accurate information and support with content development, media workers need resources on how to be more effective in their particular context – be it radio, TV, community media or public broadcasting. These 'communication strategy' resources need to respond to the local media context, moving beyond the level of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) campaigns or information about NGO project implementation.

Strategic resources about how to work effectively with information providers – 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 HIV and AIDS communication. Resources that can aid both media and HIV and AIDS organisations – international, regional and local – to work together more effectively are highly valuable.

There is a gap in materials covering the relationship between communicators and audiences. A range of factors influence how audiences receive HIV and 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 HIV and AIDS information.

Challenges for e-resourcing

Lack of research
The effectiveness of providing online resources to local communicators is under-researched and largely undocumented. Monitoring the consumption of online resources is generally beyond the scope of most project-evaluation efforts. There is anecdotal evidence, as well as some impact analysis, that media workers do not strongly engage with e-resources. Knowledge of the various online information resources seems limited (Field Research, Davies, 2005).

Awareness
Media workers are unaware of the online resources available to them, which presents a challenge to e-resourcing on HIV and AIDS. User statistics for HIV and 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. In a recent study of local media in Uganda and Serbia (Field research, Davies, 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 HIV and AIDS communicators. There is a gap between the supply of these e-resources and the marketing and promotion of them to media around the world.

Appropriate content
Inappropriate content is unlikely to reach its intended audience. Content could be rejected if a source is deemed too external. An external source could undermine the message if it focuses attention on other issues, such as colonialism or the undermining of male authority. In this

way it will not be particularly useful for a local media person who is trying to develop effective HIV and AIDS communication. It can be compared to an external consultant from Europe coming in to 'train' local media on HIV and AIDS communication techniques that are not appropriate to the context, and which render the training unsuccessful.

A challenge in HIV and AIDS e-resourcing for media is to make ICT-enabled communication more of a service and integrate it with local 'off-line' communication. Online initiatives that are seen as something imposed from outside result in less effective advocacy and behaviour change. Much of the present online HIV and AIDS content from around the world is in English rather than in national or local languages, making Internet literacy a major issue. The potential impact of western-designed e-resources 'competing' with local communication needs to be understood and mitigated by emphasising context in the use of e-resources. It is highly problematic to have generic and possibly politicised 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 communicators to use it as well.

Appropriate technology
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). 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 and communication networks (Chetley, 2005).

It is a challenge of e-resources to be *technically appropriate*, using stripped down low-end technology that is more easily accessible. Affordable and frequent access to the Internet is a barrier that many developing country media workers struggle to overcome, and this fact should be understood as a key underlying factor influencing the design and usage of e-resources. Developing resources that use the most accessible options, such as email, and which are designed in a way that minimises the need for extended and high speed Internet access should be the focus for e-resource suppliers. However this has not always been in evidence online, as demonstrated by the numerous examples of HIV and AIDS e-resource sites heavy with graphics, Java script, PDF files and other content which requires sustained access and proprietary software. 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 need to understand the context of usage. It is not difficult to design e-resources that use stripped down technology; the technology is not the challenge, the challenge is for e-resources suppliers in the North to understand why this is so important.

There is still a need for printed materials. 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 had trouble using websites and CD-ROMs. 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 a printed version" (Healthlink Worldwide, 2004).

Distribution and promotion of existing content is key. In transferring communication resources online, suppliers should be aware of the constraints of usage, as well as the gradual nature of take-up, which tends to build slowly each year. 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-effectiveness 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.

Conclusion

Online resources should *enable* local media productions inasmuch as they are providing crucial up-to-date and credible information and data. They should also *support* local production 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 and AIDS communication.

There is a wealth of valuable information and content available online, and developing 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 e-resources are not reaching their target audiences. It is not sufficient to simply put content online: that is the easy part. The difficult part is to lead people to this content and keep them coming back regularly.

Recommendations:

1. *Educate local media about the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet for HIV and AIDS research.* This education may be delivered through a variety of traditional educational routes such as printed training materials, training workshops and conferences – as well as through new ICT-enabled routes, such as online training courses, downloadable fact sheets or email newsletters.

2. *Raise awareness of existing e-resources*. Signposting services, such as a manual of recommended HIV and AIDS data and information links, and links between major portals and HIV and AIDS-focused websites would be useful. Additionally it would be valuable if there were signposting services that direct media to sources and networks that are contextually relevant for them.

3. *Increase collective marketing of existing e-resources*. Share information about available e-resources during the health communication and media training workshops that are run by HIV and AIDS programmes. This could be done in tandem with printed resources as part of clear distribution strategies – for example, a printed manual of e-resources could be made available through National AIDS Councils or information centres and as part of communication trainings.

4. *Develop e-resources that are appropriate to local media contexts.* 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.

Readings

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Internet links

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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.iconnect-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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