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Guinea pigs and the frantic search for the AIDS vaccine gel!!

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A sample analysis of press coverage of the Ushercell microbicide trials, and the launch of the *Phambili* HIV and AIDS vaccine trials (February 4-21, 2007)

1. Overview

In exploring coverage of the microbicide trials that were executed in the beginning of 2007, 19 content items from the print media for the period February 4 to February 21 (2007) were analysed. The content items dealt with two key areas.

1. The controversy surrounding the termination of the Ushercell microbicide trials, where it was found that volunteers who had been using the gel had contracted the HI virus; and
2. the start of the *Phambili* HIV/AIDS vaccine trials.

The print media we monitored were: *The Star*, *The Citizen*, *Sowetan*, *Daily Sun*, *Business Day*, *Beeld*, *Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Independent*, *Mail & Guardian*, *Saturday Star*, and *The Weekender*.

However, content items dealing with the issue were only found in six newspapers: *City Press* (5), *The Star* (4), *Business Day* (3), *Sowetan* (3), *Daily Sun* (2) and *The Citizen* (2).

The content items included hard news stories, feature news stories, briefs, editorials, a letter and a 'right to reply'.

2. Methodology

While the focus was on content items specifically dealing with the failed microbicide trials, the start of the *Phambili* vaccine trials was also of interest because they began while the controversy over the microbicide trials was ongoing in the media. The vaccine trials reintroduce the question of ethical codes of conduct in HIV/AIDS research in South Africa. As Glenda Gray, the principal investigator in the vaccine trials put it: "It's a terrible time to launch." (*Business Day*, February 9)

Various attributes of the 19 content items were captured, such as date, author/s, type of story and sources. The stories key messages were also captured, and issues such as bias and clarity assessed.

The following definitions are used:

- 'Key messages' refer to the clear message a reader is likely to get from a content item. If the key message is unclear (e.g. "It is unclear if microbicides work or don't work"), the story is monitored as such.
- 'Sources' refers to a person or organisation who is quoted either directly or indirectly in an item.
- The categories for 'fairness' are presented below (see Table 3). Only clear instances of stories being unfair or bias in favour or against any group were monitored as such.
- 'Clarity' (Section 4.6) refers to whether or not the issues raised were clear, whether or not the content item was contradictory, and whether or not there were any unexplained issues in the content item.
- The term 'HIV and AIDS researchers' is used as a generic term to indicate specific researchers referred to in a story, or the HIV and AIDS research community more generally.

3. Summary of key findings

- The stories were afforded significant prominence in some of the newspapers monitored. For example, it was the lead front page story in *City Press* and a front page story in the *Daily Sun*;
- Just over a quarter of the content items dramatised the issues. This included using phrases such as "frantic search", describing the volunteers as "desperate" or "pleading", the use of exclamation marks, different font sizes and capitals to emphasise controversy, and the use of unnamed sources who make allegations that are not substantiated in the items monitored;
- Most content items analysed show a clear bias either in favour of the HIV and AIDS researchers, or against the researchers. At times the researchers are portrayed in an extremely negative light (there are suggestions that they exploited the volunteers and are corrupt). However, this is balanced by a positive portrayal of the HIV and AIDS researchers in the content items overall in the articles reviewed.
- In contrast, the volunteers are treated ambivalently and even in a demeaning way in several content items. For example, they are portrayed as desperate and naive victims, who can be promiscuous and untrustworthy.
- More than half of the content items analysed contain one or more statements that are vague or unexplained. While these vary in importance,

there are clear instances of confusion around how the microbicide trials work, and what the exact methodological logic behind the trials is. In this regard, the research community could play a more proactive role, even while there are suggestions that they have tried to properly inform the media.

- The sensational treatment of the story, together with clear factual inaccuracies and a reliance on wire services for copy, suggests that some newspapers at the time of the research still lacked the in-house capacity to report on the HIV/AIDS pandemic responsibly. This is a concern when those newspapers (such as *Daily Sun*) take as their target market communities where HIV and AIDS is prevalent.
- At the same time, that some newspapers, such as *Beeld*, *The Sunday Independent*, and *Mail & Guardian*, appear to have ignored the story during the monitored period, shows a lack of commonly held assumptions of newsworthiness regarding HIV and AIDS stories in South Africa's newsrooms.

4. Findings

4.1. Key messages

Table 1 below shows the key messages for the 19 content items. The top key messages tend to fall into two camps: those that support the HIV and AIDS researchers (or HIV and AIDS research generally) and those that claim that the researchers have behaved unethically and irresponsibly ("Researchers are ethical, responsible, but things can go wrong" versus, "The researchers were/are unethical, irresponsible"). Perhaps the most extreme key messages critical of the HIV and AIDS researchers were the insinuation that the volunteers were exploited, and that the HIV and AIDS researchers had been corrupt. However the key message that the HIV and AIDS researchers behaved ethically and responsibly predominated.

The top key message relates to the inconclusiveness of the microbicide trials generally ("It is unclear if microbicides work or don't work"). This key message was therefore evident in content items that were critical of the researchers and in those supportive of research ethics in South Africa.

The third most common key message ("Poor people are vulnerable to exploitation") re-occurs in various forms in many of the content items analysed. These include: "The volunteers are victims/ were exploited", "People with HIV and AIDS are vulnerable to exploitation", "Women are victims, passive, exploited, vulnerable", and "Africans are exploited by researchers, drug companies". While the statement that vulnerable groups (such as women, poor people or people with HIV and AIDS) can be exploited is a truism, there is a more troubling sense where several content items portray the volunteers (and poor, black Africans generally) as naïve and helpless and unable to properly make decisions for themselves.

It is unclear if microbicides work or don't work	9
Researchers are ethical, responsible, but things can go wrong	7
Poor people are vulnerable to exploitation	5
International drug companies, researchers etc. are professional	5
The researchers were/are unethical, irresponsible	4
The researchers are being treated unfairly	4
The volunteers are victims, were exploited	4
HIV/AIDS research is out of control	3
HIV/AIDS vaccines can work	3
Microbicides work, or could work, or are an exciting option	2
Microbicides don't work, are dangerous	2
There are problems with HIV/AIDS research	2
The media is not doing a good job	2
People with HIV/AIDs are vulnerable to exploitation	2
Global drug companies are unethical, irresponsible	1
Women are victims, passive, exploited, vulnerable	1
Africans are exploited by researchers, drug companies	1
Poor people exploit research opportunities	1
It is unclear if the researchers were ethical, responsible	1
The microbicide issue is being exploited by some	1
Drugs or other cures that are no rigorously researched are dangerous	1
HIV/AIDS researchers are corrupt	1
It's unclear if HIV/AIDS vaccines can work or can't work	1

Table 1: Key messages

4.2. Summary of sources

Table 2 below shows the source count for the content items. A source is a person or organisation who is quoted either directly or indirectly in an item. As can be seen, some of the sources quoted are unnamed. While this may be necessary in terms of protecting the identity of volunteers or, perhaps, Medical Research Council (MRC) employees, there is a sense in which it contributes towards the 'sensationalisation' of the issues at hand. This is especially the case when, as in one instance, an unnamed source makes an unsubstantiated, but serious allegation.

Medical Research Council (MRC), president (Anthony Mbewu)	6
Unnamed volunteers	3
Health Minister	3
Conrad (Lut van Damme, Annette Larkin)	3
Perinatal HIV Research Unit (PHRU), principal investigator (Glenda Gray)	3
MRC (unnamed)	3
Named volunteers	2
Health Minister spokesperson (Sibane Mngadi)	2
MRC research head (Gita Ramjee)	2
TAC (Mark Heywood)	2
HIV Vaccine Trials Network (HVTN), principal investigator (Lawrence Corey)	2
Reproductive HIV Research Unit (Sibongile Walaza, Jocelyn Moyes)	2
MRC's [HIV Prevention Research Unit] HPRU principal investigator (Roshini Govinden)	1
Community leader (MaNgidi Sithole)	1
PHRU (Eftyhia Vardas)	1
National Institute of Health (US), director (Elias Zerhouni)	1
Steve Biko Biometric Research Centre (Amesi Dai)	1
Member, community advisory group (Solomon Nzama)	1

Table 2: Sources

4.3. Fairness

In most content items the story was not fairly reported. Most showed a bias that either clearly favoured the HIV and AIDS researchers, or was clearly and specifically critical of them. Often this bias was by implication, rather than directly stated. For example, a story that discusses the launch of the *Phambili* trials, without contextualising this within the controversy surrounding the microbicide trials or the government investigation into HIV and AIDS research ethics, can be considered biased in favour of HIV and AIDS researchers (i.e. it is bias by omission of a key fact).

Table 3 shows that overall there was a clear bias in favour of the HIV and AIDS researchers. Less than a third of the stories showed no favour for either the researchers or the volunteers, while 4 out of the 19 stories can be said to be clearly critical of the researchers. No stories can be said to clearly favour the volunteers (see below).

Clearly favours researchers	8
Clearly against researchers	4
Favours neither researchers nor volunteers	6
Clearly favours volunteers	-
Cannot say	1
Story sensationalistic	5

Table 3: Bias¹

Table 4 suggests that the *City Press* showed a clear bias against the HIV and AIDS researchers, and a dramatised take on the stories. In contrast, *The Star* and the *The Citizen* represented the researchers in a more favourable light.

While *Daily Sun* published one content item clearly favouring the researchers, this is a SAPA news item that takes the Treatment Action Campaign as its only source. The second content item is also a wire service story (Africa Eye News Service). While this favours neither the researchers nor volunteers (critical statements are made about both), the story is sensationalised.

In the case of the *Sowetan*, the content item that clearly favours the researchers is a letter written to the newspaper by the executive director of Conrad. Of the two content items that favour neither the researchers nor the volunteers, one is a SAPA wire service story (announcing the investigation by the research ethics council). The second is written by an in-house journalist, and can also said to be highly dramatised.

Of the content items analysed, the *Business Day* showed the most balanced approach to HIV and AIDS reporting (like *The Star*, it has an in-house, specialist HIV/AIDS reporter. For instance, a story in the newspaper is able to introduce the start of the *Phambili* trials, and contextualise this against the backdrop of the controversy around the microbicide trails (without confusing the two).

Newspapers with a predominantly black readership showed a tendency to treat the story more sensationally. A particular concern is that this includes papers (such as *Daily Sun*) whose target market are the communities where many of the volunteers would be drawn from. It is in these communities that informed, balanced reporting is most needed; in this instance, in order to avert unnecessary alarm, and to allow for reasonable decisions to be made by the affected public. Yet *Daily Sun's* reliance on wire services for HIV/AIDS content, together with its sensational treatment of the story (see below), suggests that it lacked the in-house decision-making and journalistic capacity to deal proactively and responsibly with HIV and AIDS coverage.

¹ 'Clearly favours researchers' means that the researchers are presented in a positive light. 'Clearly against researchers' means that the researchers are clearly targeted or singled out for criticism in the content item. 'Favours neither researchers nor volunteers' means that neither are presented in a positive light (and neither are particularly targeted for criticism). 'Story sensationalistic' means that exaggeration is used deliberately for effect, usually resulting in an imbalanced report.

	City Press	The Star	Daily Sun	The Citizen	Business Day	Sowetan
Clearly favours researchers	1	2	1	2	1	1
Clearly against researchers	4					
Favours neither researchers nor volunteers		2	1		1	2
Clearly favours volunteers	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cannot say					1	
Story sensationalistic	3		1			1

Table 4: Newspaper bias

4.4. Dramatic coverage

For the current purposes it has been assumed that a story that is highly dramatised or sensationalised is not, in general, balanced and fair. Instances of sensationalism in the content items analysed include:

- Describing the process of informing volunteers that the trial had been terminated as a "frantic search";
- Describing the volunteers as "desperate" or "pleading" not to be named in the article;
- The use of exclamation marks, different font sizes and capitals to emphasise controversy;
- The use of unnamed sources who offer allegations that are not substantiated (such as alleging that the head of the MRC's HIV Prevention and Research Unit receives special favours from the MRC head);
- Or the use of headlines such as "Another HIV-vaccine trial revealed", the word 'reveal' suggesting something covert and illicit about the trials.

A somewhat bizarre treatment of the story occurs in *Daily Sun*. The newspapers front page story "AIDS SHOCK! I got HIV from sex gel trial, says angry woman!" was published on February 9, five days after the same story had already broken in the *City Press*, and after the health ministry had ordered an investigation. The *Daily Sun* itself had referred to the story the day before by publishing a TAC comment on the issue. Yet the front page story the next day suggests that the story has just broken.

In the case of the *Sowetan*, the one story that is written by an in-house journalist is sensational in its inaccuracies. It refers to the microbicide trials a "vaccine trials", and uses phrases such as "another HIV vaccine trial is silently going on" to refer to the launch of the *Phambili* trial. This, together with the headline, "Another HIV-vaccine trial revealed", suggests that HIV and AIDS research in South Africa is an illicit activity, shrouded in secrecy.

4.5. The portrayal of the volunteers

Volunteers are treated ambivalently in stories that report their perspective; and at times their portrayal can be said to be demeaning. A number of content items portray them as desperate and naïve victims, who can be dishonest and untrustworthy. They are given little positive agency. They are “guinea pigs” who “admit” that the researchers said they should wear condoms as well as use the microbicide gel. When they are not victims, they are defrauding the researchers by registering under more than one name (to collect payment for volunteering), or selling the gel as a cure for HIV and AIDS in townships. They are also said to be people who have regular sex with multiple partners (suggesting they are promiscuous), and are portrayed at times in mildly pornographic ways: “When I first applied it [the gel], my boyfriend asked me why I was so luscious that night” or “My friends used to tell me that it makes you hot in bed.”

In contrast, in content items that did show a balanced (not dramatised) approach to the reporting – often in favour of the research community – the only notable absence from these stories is a ‘voice’ for the volunteers. In these instances, the opportunity for a more positive portrayal of the volunteers is forfeited.

4.6. Clarity

Table 5 below shows that in 10 out of the 19 content items analysed, one or more statements are vague or unexplained. These vary in importance and degree: some are central to the understanding of the content items, while others are peripheral.

For example, in one story the statement, “He said the participants were not encouraged to have unprotected sex during the trial,” is made without any contextualisation. That is, the background to this statement – that these allegations had surfaced – was not explained. Another example is the statement: “The trial vaccine has been tested elsewhere.” However, where and how it has been tested have not been stated.

In another instance, however, the examples where statements are vague or unsubstantiated are more important. Many of these relate to research procedures and methodologies. While these are clarified in some articles (for example, through the use of bullet points), the actual methodological logic behind the trials is not clearly explained in any of the articles. In this regard, despite its sensationalistic coverage of the issue, *Daily Sun's* question: “What’s the use of asking people to test a new anti-HIV gel... and then telling them to use condoms as well? How were the researchers going to discover which worked better – the gel or the condoms?” is pertinent. (However it is unclear why the newspaper did not put this question to the HIV and AIDS researchers).

Other confusing statements are attributed to the organisations participating in the research. For instance, MRC president Anthony Mbewu is quoted as saying: “...preliminary results of the study showed a potential to increase the risk of HIV infection instead of lowering it.” This contradicts a point made by the TAC’s Mark Heywood that “participants are arguably at less risk of contracting HIV” by participating in the trials because they have been counselled on safe sex.

As suggested earlier, one clear inaccuracy occurred when a *Sowetan* journalist referred to the microbicide trials as a vaccine trial.

One or more statement is vague and unexplained (varies in importance)	10
The issues are clear	8
Clear inaccuracies	1

Table 5: Clarity

7. Conclusion

This analysis suggests that a number of South Africa's newspapers at the time of the research were yet to develop the in-house capacity to report on the HIV and AIDS pandemic responsibly, accurately and with the necessary complexity. A concern is that some of the newspapers take as their target market communities where HIV and AIDS is prevalent.

The results show a clear lack of understanding of HIV and AIDS research procedures and methodologies in some newsrooms during the time of the research. A similar situation is evident in the media's uneven coverage of the trials suggesting the efficacy of circumcision in HIV and AIDS prevention. While there are suggestions that the HIV and AIDS researchers have attempted to provide accurate information to journalists, uncertainties remain.

The content items show several inaccuracies that are an apparent result of the persistent 'juniorisation' of HIV and AIDS reporting in some newsrooms, the inability to make informed editorial decisions, and the desire to sensationalise HIV and AIDS coverage.

This lack of capacity cannot be wholly compensated for by relying on wire services, given that in some instances, wire service copy is clearly intended to be used as supplementary material (it often offers a single-sourced reaction to events), or is sensationalistic or even inaccurate itself. Wire services can also not assist newspapers in making editorial decisions, as *The Daily Sun* shows.

In contrast, newspapers that had seasoned in-house journalists dedicated to the HIV and AIDS beat at their disposal showed more balanced reporting, even while some coverage can be said to be biased by omission.

The negative portrayal of volunteers is worrying. There is a sense that their treatment, together with inaccurate, or willfully sensationalistic reporting, at times borders on unethical journalism.