

Press coverage of HIV and other health issues in PNG's *Post-Courier*: 2007-2017

Abstract: The aim of this research article was to discover, using the Factiva database, how frequently Papua New Guinea's *Post-Courier*, one of the largest selling newspapers in the Pacific, covered prominent health issues namely HIV, malaria and diabetes between 2007 and 2017. Also, it tries to determine if there was a discernible pattern in the number of articles and content with previous studies on health coverage, in this case HIV, from 1987-2007. As Factiva did not hold any archives for PNG's other major newspaper—*The National*—it was excluded from this analysis. While there are marked similarities with earlier studies, the dramatic decline of health stories from 2013 onwards is a cause for concern.

Keywords: content analysis, diabetes, health journalism, HIV/AIDS, malaria, newspapers, Papua New Guinea, *Post-Courier*

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Common health issues in PNG

THREE common and high profile diseases found in Papua New Guinea (PNG) were selected for this study—HIV/AIDS, malaria and diabetes. It is evident that PNG, a country with a population of more than eight million people, faces a significant public health crisis. The country has the highest incidence and prevalence of HIV in the Pacific. The latest figures show that 46,000 people live with HIV (UNAIDS, 2017). The largest group affected are sex workers, and they account for 18 percent of all infections. On the positive side, PNG has experienced a significant improvement in the roll-out of treatment services, with more than 24,000 people living with HIV accessing antiretroviral therapy, which slows the spread of the disease. Also, since 2010, HIV infections have decreased by 34 percent and AIDS-related deaths have decreased by four percent. However, the country's health system is facing difficulties in keeping people on life-long treatment, especially among key populations and in the country's remote and often hard-to-reach communities. Globally, from 2010-2016, there was a 32 percent decrease in AIDS related deaths and

a 16 percent decrease in HIV infections. However, despite vast improvements in prevention and access to treatment, the disease remains a global health issue with 1.8 million new HIV infections in 2016 and 37 million people still living with the virus (UNAIDS, 2017).

With the introduction of more than seven million mosquito nets, PNG has slashed the incidences of malaria since 2004, from 400 cases per 100,000 people to 200. Between 2009 and 2015, the incidence of malaria admissions to public health facilities dropped by 83 percent, and malaria death rates in health facilities fell by 76 percent. But malaria still accounts for eight percent of deaths in PNG (WHO, 2018).

The latest data from the World Health Organisation (WHO) show that the number of people living with diabetes in PNG rose from five percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 2016, and deaths from the disease accounted for six percent of all deaths in PNG in 2016. It is reported as a disease on the rise. It is influenced by several factors that include insufficient physical exercise, unhealthy diets, cultural values and low education. Government strategies and initiatives have not been effective in educating and motivating the public (WHO, 2016).

In this paper, the acronym HIV is used to include people living with HIV, and also those living with AIDS, which is the next stage of the disease when the human immune system breaks down. The term ‘media’ refers primarily to the print journalists.

Coverage of health in PNG

The first studies of press coverage of health issues in PNG appeared in the late 1980s and they focused on specific topics like HIV rather than comparative analyses with other diseases. The first content analysis of newspaper coverage of HIV in PNG from 1987-1999 was conducted by Cullen (2000) who focused on PNG because, at that stage, it had more than 90 percent of all HIV cases in the southern Pacific region, and the largest number of media outlets. Cullen’s research opted for a quantitative analysis of all HIV stories in PNG’s two daily newspapers, *The National* and the *PNG Post-Courier* from 1987, when the first HIV case was discovered, to 1999 when the first act of Parliament concerning HIV was introduced. Findings from the study showed disproportionate emphasis on reporting infection rates, international funding and regional workshops, with little in-depth analysis of the disease or educational content. And while the language and tone of HIV stories showed more sensitivity to people living with the disease, the focus of coverage was narrow with only a few references to the medical, political, social, economic, cultural, religious and relationship factors that influence health outcomes.

A comparison of press coverage of HIV in PNG in 2000 and 2005 revealed that there were no feature articles in daily newspaper, and that the scope and

focus of press coverage did not change. In the 2005 study, workshops, the latest figures for HIV and 'harms' had the largest number of stories. None of the news stories contained direct educational messages about ways to avoid infection. This matched the results from Cullen's previous study (Cullen, 2005, p. 148).

Another study of content analysis of all HIV news stories in the *Post-Courier* in 2010 revealed some significant changes in comparison to the 2000 and 2005 studies. First, there were far more stories in the 2010 study and this pointed to the fact that the disease was still considered newsworthy, more than 20 years after it was first detected in PNG in 1987. There was also a shift towards the inclusion of educational content in feature stories, recognising that both information and educational content are an essential part of reporting the story regardless of their impact on reducing the rate of HIV infections. Other significant developments included the inclusion of information about how to avoid infection, and nearly all the feature articles revealed a much greater acceptance of people living with HIV, including transgender and gay people. Stories allocated to people living with HIV increased, while stories about funding and workshops decreased in the 2010 study.

The trend to widen coverage began some years earlier. Another content analysis by Cullen of press coverage of HIV in PNG in 2007 analysed all online news items on HIV from the websites of the *Post-Courier* and *The National* during a three-month period from September to November 2007. Surprisingly, while stories on HIV were similar in content to Cullen's 2000 and 2005 study, there was a new focus on domestic violence with both daily newspapers including 10 news stories each on the topic. *The National* ran four editorials, three front-page stories and three news stories while the *Post-Courier* included two editorials, one front-page story, one in-depth feature and six news stories. Domestic violence is a major social problem in PNG, and an issue closely linked to HIV because it undermines the ability of PNG women to negotiate safe sexual practices. In November 2007, the *Post-Courier* wrote two editorials calling for an end to domestic violence and three news stories about a woman who suffered major burns after her husband set her alight. *The National* included three news items on the same incident and three news items on the rising number of rape cases in the country. While there is insufficient research on press coverage of domestic violence in PNG, it could be argued that coverage of domestic violence in September, October and November 2007 in both newspapers represented a change in the reporting of HIV in PNG, and suggested journalists had started to link HIV with the wider social and cultural context of the disease.

In summary, findings from the content analysis on the reporting of HIV in PNG's two national newspapers, *The National* and *Post-Courier*; in 2000, 2005, 2007 and 2010 tried to answer two questions: did coverage of the disease decrease or increase over the years, and did the topics change and or remain the

same? Although the data was limited, there was enough to provide some answers to these questions. First, figures reveal that there was a significant increase in news stories in all four studies. There were more in-depth educational feature articles, and the tone revealed a change in attitude among PNG journalists to report the disease with greater sensitivity towards people living with the disease and to include information about how to avoid infection. Overall, there was still a strong emphasis on reporting harms, infection rates and regional workshops. Journalists in PNG, however, did begin to widen coverage of the disease and report HIV as a development story with political, social, economic, cultural, religious and relationship aspects (Cullen, 2010, p. 157). Indeed, former editors and journalists from *the Post-Courier* and *The National* newspapers should be highly commended for consistently tracking and reporting the spread of the disease.

The aim of this new research is to broaden the focus of previous studies which focused solely on coverage of HIV, and to discover, using the Factiva database, how frequently PNG's *Post-Courier* covered health issues, namely HIV/AIDS, malaria and diabetes, from 2007 to 2017. Also, the research aims to determine if there was a discernible pattern in the types and content of health stories compared to previous studies, and if there were any significant changes. As Factiva did not hold any archives for PNG's other national newspaper, *The National*, it was excluded from this analysis.

Method

In health research, the methodology used to document media coverage and representations of diseases is generally a quantitative approach. So this study opted for both a quantitative and content analysis of all HIV, malaria and diabetes stories in PNG's *Post-Courier* newspaper. The *Post-Courier* was selected for this research as it is the largest selling daily newspaper in the Pacific, and in PNG, with a daily circulation of 41,000 copies. Founded in 1969, it is majority owned by Rupert Murdoch's *News Corp* and serves a mainly urban readership who are considered to be influential in the community.

This research tabulated, graphed and compared the number of health stories (both web and print versions) between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2017. The Factiva database search query parameters were set as follows: 'HIV OR human immunodeficiency virus OR AIDS OR acquired immune deficiency syndrome OR diabetes OR malaria.' The search for these free-text terms was conducted in the full articles. One major reason for the focus on press reports rather than a wider study on media coverage of the disease is due, in a large part, to more effective access to archival print data. Data collection involved identifying various story formats for each newspaper article. These included: a news story (less than 450 words) or a feature (more than 750 words); an editorial, or a front-page story; an international or local story. In the variable section, 'International' refers to news

stories about health in foreign countries while ‘local’ refers to news stories on health within PNG. ‘Harmful effects’ refers to a news story that describes the consequences of contracting a disease, namely sickness, stigma and possibly death. ‘Offering solutions’ refers to health stories that contain information about how to prevent infection. ‘Determinants of health’ refers to health stories that include social, economic, political, cultural, environmental or religious factors that influence health outcomes. Both the story format and content variable sections were used by Cullen when he analysed press coverage of HIV (Cullen, 2000, 2005, 2010), and they provide the basis for comparison with the results from this wider study that includes HIV but also diabetes and malaria.

Results and analysis

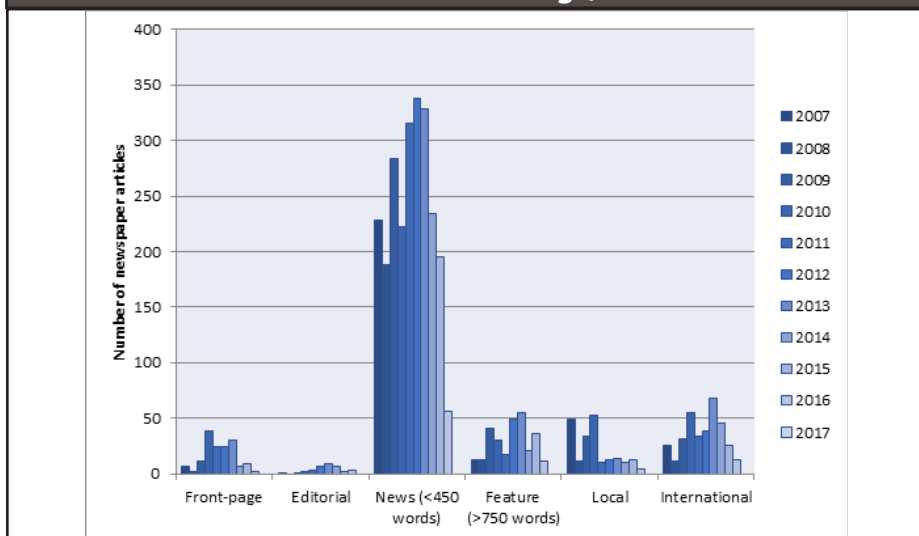
A total of 3416 newspaper articles relevant to the reporting of health issues (namely HIV/AIDS, malaria and diabetes) between 2007 and 2017 were reviewed from PNG’s *Post-Courier*. Table 1 shows the findings for the number of news stories, according to the various format categories and content variables, along with the statistical mean and rank. Note that *Factiva* did not return any data for the 2017 search. The statistical mean refers to the central tendency of the data. It is determined by adding all the data points and then dividing the total by the number of points. The mean was calculated by adding all the data between 2007 and 2017 for each story type and content variable, and then dividing by 11, as this was the number of years between 2007 and 2017, which gives an annual mean or ‘average’ number. The rankings are according to mean,

Table 1: *Post-Courier* health issue coverage, 2007-2017

		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Mean	Rank
Story type	Front page	7	2	11	38	24	24	30	6	9	2	0	14	5
	Editorial	1	0	1	2	3	7	9	6	2	3	0	3	6
	News (450 words)	228	188	284	222	316	338	329	234	195	56	0	217	1
	Feature (750 words)	12	13	41	30	17	49	55	21	36	11	0	26	3
	Local	49	11	34	52	10	13	14	10	12	4	0	19	4
	International	26	11	31	55	34	38	68	45	25	12	0	31	2
Content variable	Figures & Statistics	15	19	30	37	31	32	49	43	29	9	0	27	4
	Educational work-shops	46	29	38	27	13	6	16	12	7	4	0	18	5
	Harmful effects	78	43	134	136	243	363	327	190	167	40	0	156	1
	Determinants of health	102	84	109	80	41	19	30	18	26	18	0	48	3
	Offering solutions	82	50	91	119	76	49	83	59	50	17	0	61	2
	Total	323	225	402	399	404	469	505	322	279	88	0	311	

Note: Indicating story formats and content variables in coverage of HIV, malaria and diabetes.

Table2: Post-Courier health issue coverage, 2007-2017: Formats



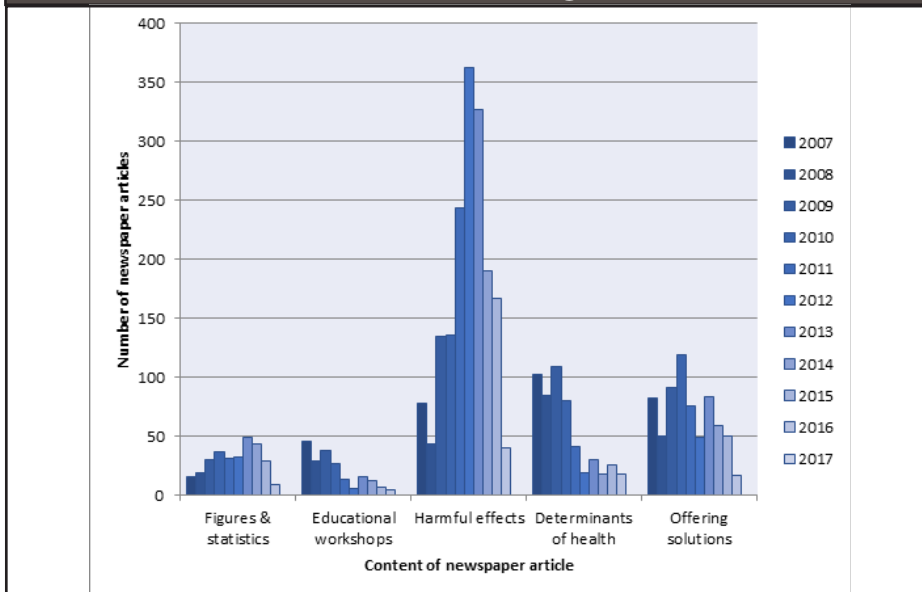
Note: Indicating story formats in coverage of HIV, malaria and diabetes.

and also match the rankings according to total (as they should, statistically). Table 2 shows that the findings from the various content variables followed a similar pattern to previous studies on coverage of HIV, namely that news stories topped the list (2390). Judging by the number of news stories on health, it is evident that health was considered newsworthy until 2016 when a dramatic decline began. However, international stories (345) overtook local stories (209) which reversed the findings seen in previous studies on health stories, namely on HIV. Feature (285) front page (153) and editorial (34) followed a similar pattern in ranking to studies of HIV by Cullen in 2000, 2005, 2007; Cullen & Callaghan, 2010.

Table 3 reveals that the category ‘harmful effects’ had the highest number of references (1721), followed by ‘offering solutions’ (676) and the ‘determinants of health’ (527). Figures and statistics (294) were still an important category in health stories together with workshops (198), although they finished well below the other categories. This was an encouraging result because in previous studies on health coverage, namely HIV, these two categories were top of the list. Another positive development was the continual rise of solutions and determinants in health stories, although the prominence of harmful effects reflects a similar pattern to Cullen’s previous studies in terms of its ranking, and indicates that health stories were frequently framed to reflect negative aspects of health.

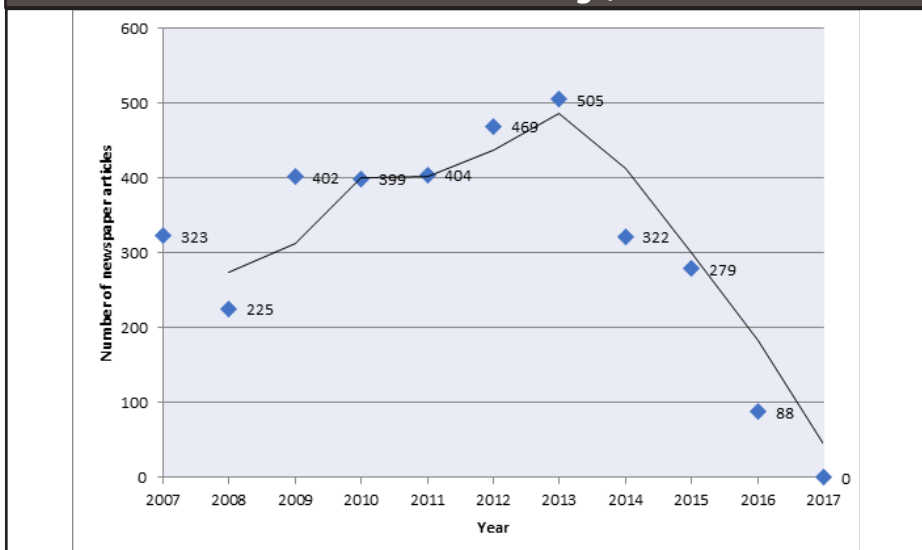
Table 4 shows the trend in the total number of news stories per year. A two-period moving average trend line was deemed to be the most fitting way to represent this data, that is the average of the first two data points was used as the

Table 3: Post-Courier health issue coverage, 2007-2017: Content



Note: Indicating content variables in coverage of HIV, malaria and diabetes.

Table 4: Post-Courier health issues coverage, 2007-2017: Overall



Note: Indicating content variables in coverage of HIV, malaria and diabetes, overall trend.

first point in the moving average trend line. It reveals a steady increase in health issue coverage between 2007 and 2010, then a plateau until 2011, followed by a steady increase until 2013, after which coverage took a steady decline. Note

that the zero against 2017 is due to a lack of data in Factiva rather than a lack of health coverage in the *PNG Post-Courier*. The author investigated the omission by Factiva of data for 2017 but was unable to obtain an adequate reason. Nevertheless, there has been a clear downward trend in health coverage in recent years. It is recommended that, if possible, further data be sought to overcome Factiva's limitations. As Factiva did not hold any archives for PNG's second largest selling newspaper, *The National*, it was excluded from this analysis. The overall findings in Table 4 reveal that while health was considered newsworthy with peaks in the number of news stories in 2010 and 2013, there was also a worrying development—that coverage of health stories in the *Post-Courier* fell sharply—from a peak of 505 stories in 2013 to only 88 in 2016. So what are possible factors behind such a dramatic decline?

Challenges for journalists

Based on previous studies and interviews with editors and journalists (Cullen, 2000, 2010), health stories present a real challenge for journalists in PNG, especially in trying to find an appropriate response while working with organisational constraints. The reality in the newsroom is that coverage of health has to compete with many other issues. Editors, on their part, fear that their papers may be seen as merely relaying public health information. Also, there are only a few trained health journalists. Most importantly, there is also a feeling that 'health fatigue' has set in, where readers may already be saturated with what seems to be the usual narratives of infection, suffering and death surrounding diseases in the newspaper. Health is seen as a worthy but dull topic. Health journalism is a practice in which strategy follows structure—and media logic will likely never accommodate certain types of health realities because of issues of media funding, ownership and audience capital (Hinnant, Subramanian, & Jenkins, 2018, p. 32).

Yet health stories are important. Swain (2005) argues the media, particularly journalists, exercise a significant influence in moulding public opinions and attitudes. Walsh-Childers and Braddock (2013) support this claim and argue that the media can set the public agenda, frame issues and influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (2016). But Swain (2005) goes further and argues that much of society's understanding of disease, including who it affects and its future possibilities, comes from the media (Swain, 2005, p. 258). Admittedly, some would disagree with this statement and stress that the role of the media in reporting health is still unclear and limited, and that better information and education on health equals improved health outcomes is problematic. Also, the press is not always regarded as the most reliable source for such information.

The debate continues.

In terms of the content of health stories, social scientists have come to realize

in recent years that socio-cultural factors influence complex health behaviors. Social determinants, such as socioeconomic status, shape 'life conditions that, in turn, influence health' (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008, p. 241). Nonetheless, individual risk factors are the subject of most research and media coverage. Yet, beyond an individual's own social network, there are larger structural and environment determinants that affect health outcomes, such as living conditions related to one's employment.

While it is encouraging to see that many health stories in the *Post-Courier* from 2007 onwards included the determinants of health, their inclusion developed slowly. An understanding of some health communication theories could help broaden the current scope and content of health reporting in PNG. One theory in particular—Social Change Communication (SCC)—challenges the media to extend coverage of health from primarily a human interest story to one that is linked to social, economic, cultural and political factors. In contrast, Behaviour Change Communication theory (BCC) was found to be less effective because it was limited mainly to promoting the knowledge and skills of individuals without taking into account the wider social and economic contexts. It still however continues to dominate both the clinical and social sciences, and this is where journalists often seek expert views. Both SCC and BCC theories nevertheless challenge journalists to rethink their approach when reporting on health, although SCC can be difficult to implement in socially repressive environments where such stories could threaten the privilege of the status quo.

Papua New Guinean journalist and academic Kingston Namun (2015) analysed the framing of health stories in both the *Post-Courier* and *The National* in January, March and May 2014. He concluded that health stories were framed too narrowly with two main frames—the positive improvement of health services or statements from members of Parliament. He argued that newspapers in PNG need to increase their thematic frames and use wider network of sources when reporting on health issues (Namun, 2015, p. 63).

Many questions, however, remain and a deeper consideration needs to be given to the role of journalism in health promotion/development contexts. For example, how does the media address extremely complex questions like gender inequality and the connections between rising health costs and ecological sustainable development? Also, what are the arguments around news values, styles of media reporting, audience expectation, newsroom practices and newsroom hierarchies that mitigate against this type of reporting? While the media have a significant role to play in informing the public and holding governments to account, a more immediate problem is health fatigue: how can journalists report effectively on diseases that have been around for more than 30 years? After all, readers have been saturated with narratives of infection, suffering and death over several decades. Maybe the decline in health stories in the *Post-Courier* from

2013 onwards is to be expected and follows the pattern American research Anthony Downs identified as the ‘issue-attention cycle’ of interest, peak and decline in media coverage of long-term illnesses such as cancer (Downs, 1972, p. 38).

For now, the most challenging aspect for editors and journalists in PNG and elsewhere, especially where HIV, malaria and diabetes are serious public health threats, is to realise the complexity and interconnectedness of the web of issues linked to these diseases. These connections have important implications for political and financial reporters, editorial page writers, television producers and radio journalists, especially if they want to engage in meaningful coverage of health and its broad ramifications. The author acknowledges that there have been significant improvements in PNG, in the last 30 years, in the coverage and content of health stories.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to discover, using the Factiva database, how frequently PNG’s *Post-Courier*, the largest selling newspaper in the Pacific, covered prominent health issues namely HIV, malaria and diabetes between 2007 and 2017, and to determine if there was a discernible pattern in the number of articles and content with previous studies on health coverage, namely HIV, from 1987-2007. The findings show there were significant similarities with earlier studies, especially the large number of health stories from 2007-2013, and the consistent emphasis on ‘harmful effects’. This was the top content variable in this study. This could be viewed as placing too much emphasis on the negative aspects of the three diseases— HIV, malaria and diabetes. Yet, a positive development was the inclusion of stories that offered solutions and included the determinants of health. These were ranked second and third in Table 1. There were only glimpses of these two categories in previous studies on health stories, namely HIV, in 2000, 2005, 2007 and 2010. However, there was a significant decline in the number of health stories that peaked in 2013, and then declined steadily.

The author relied on previous interviews with PNG editors and journalists in 2000 and 2005 to determine possible reasons for the gradual decline of coverage. These included the lack of trained health journalists, competing news stories and organisational restraints. Further research should include face-to-face interviews with both PNG editors and journalists to understand, more fully, the reasons for the rise, peak and decline of health stories. While the exact role of the media in reporting health remains unclear—should it be purely informational or include educational elements—much of society’s understanding of these three diseases in a country like PNG and other Pacific countries, comes from the media.

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