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Sourcing of HIV/AIDS treatment news: A case study of selected South African print media

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Abstract

The basis of this study is to establish whether news on HIV/AIDS treatment issues is dominated by non-expert and activist sources as opposed to state or government and expert sources. It also seeks to determine if there is a growing use of the alternative or non-official sources in the reporting of this issue in the selected South African Press (*The Star* and *The Sowetan*). In reference to the concept of 'primary definition' by Hall (1978) and his colleagues, official sources have automatically been assumed to be the dominant sources as regards usage by journalists or reporters and have as a result been expected to be the definers of news agendas. However, this concept has been criticised by Schlesinger (1990), who argues that non-official/activist sources may have more power to define media topics than has been implied in the past. This study therefore has examined whether such a trend may be shifting to pave way for the increased use of alternative sources as well.

The findings of this report have proved that while official sources continue to be used in dominance as sources, there is undoubtedly a large use of non-official sources as key sources as well. This is a challenge to Hall's (1978) concept that in its rigid nature fails to accommodate such a notion. It is however in concurrence with Schlesinger's (1990) views that recognise the fact that non-official/alternative sources cannot be underestimated in terms of their power to define news agendas. Further, in an attempt to explain why and how these non-official sources have succeeded in achieving media attention, the study has also examined some media strategies that have been put in place by various source organisations. It has also proposes a more nuance model of the 'theory of dominance' that gives a provision for the ability of sources to be dynamic because of various factors.