

A Content Analysis of Sexually Transmitted Disease in the Print News Media

by

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Remember herpes, syphilis and gonorrhea? Since the arrival of AIDS, most people have forgotten. Now there is a raging epidemic of these and other sexually transmitted diseases.

One in five Americans has the genital herpes virus; the United States has more syphilis and gonorrhea than any other developed nation.

‘It’s a national disgrace,’ said Dr. Judith Wasserheit of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is trying to turn the numbers around” (Sheryl Gay Stolberg, writing for the New York Times, March 15, 1998).

By publishing these words, an editor at the New York Times broke through what one expert has called a “conspiracy of silence” surrounding the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases (New York Times, 4/98). Currently the United States has the highest rate of non-HIV STDs in the developed world, with more than 13 million new infections every year [1]. STDs account for greater than half of the most frequently reported infections in the U.S. and represent an annual financial burden of more than 10 billion dollars [1]. However, the problem of STDs is largely missing from public discourse and public awareness of STDs is low [1, 2]. In order to refocus the attention of the public health community on this important but often forgotten problem, the Institute of Medicine published its 1997 report, The Hidden Epidemic: Confronting Sexually Transmitted Diseases. The report identified several factors contributing to the “hidden” nature of the current STD epidemic that hamper prevention efforts. These factors include strong cultural taboos relating to sexuality, the presence of unbalanced media messages, lack of public awareness, and the asymptomatic natural history of many of these infections. This study will examine the coverage STDs receive in nine national

newspapers to provide a baseline assessment of how the problem is being presented to the public through the print news media.

#### A. Impact of Sexually Transmitted Diseases

STDs disproportionately impact certain groups -- women, young people, and minority communities in particular. Because many STDs can progress without symptoms, women are more likely to experience long-term consequences such as infertility associated with pelvic inflammatory disease and cervical cancer.

Social factors such as poor socioeconomic status, lack of education, and social inequalities indirectly increase prevalence of STDs in African American and Hispanic communities [1]. Although there has been an overall decline in curable STDs such as gonorrhea and syphilis, rates of syphilis and gonorrhea in African Americans are 60 and 40 times higher respectively than in whites, and syphilis is 4 times as common in Hispanics as in whites. [3]. Rates of viral STDs such as herpes simplex, hepatitis B, and the human papilloma virus continue to rise in all populations [1].

Approximately two-thirds of new cases of STDs occur in individuals ages 19-25 and one third of people in this age group has had an STD [2]. Rates of gonorrhea and chlamydia are highest in women between the ages of 15-19 [3].

STDs not only cause significant morbidity on their own, they are also known to be significant co-factors in the transmission of HIV. Individuals infected with STDs are 3 to 5 times more vulnerable to becoming infected with HIV if exposed [4]. This is particularly true for ulcerative STDs like syphilis and herpes. One study estimated that 1,200 cases of HIV infection were prevented by the successful treatment of 100 cases of

syphilis [5]. There is also a concern that STDs themselves may accelerate the course of an HIV-related illness, although these studies have been inconclusive [4].

### B. Public Opinion and the Media

Despite the well-documented burden that sexually transmitted diseases represent, public awareness of STDs is low, and the epidemic remains largely missing from public discourse. A 1998 Kaiser Family Foundation/Glamour magazine survey found dramatic deficits in knowledge of STDs. Although up to 85% of respondents claimed to know a “fair” amount or “a lot”, “When asked to name STDs they have heard of, very few men or women know of the most common, and potentially damaging STDs” [2]. Only 34% of women had heard of chlamydia, a STD frequently implicated in pelvic inflammatory disease. According to another survey, almost two-thirds of women age 18-60 surveyed knew nothing or very little about non-HIV STDs [1, p. 69].

In order for an issue to become publicly discussed and debated, it must first gain attention of the media. In particular, the news media are recognized for their powerful agenda-setting influence [6]. Research on agenda-setting has indicated that the media agenda sets the public agenda and both media and public agendas help set the policy agenda [6]. It has been shown that the New York Times, the White House, scientific journals and public opinion polls are the most important factors in determining what issues reach the media agenda [6]. Consequently, these same factors influence the range of solutions possible - only when an issue gains visibility in the news is it made available for stakeholders to argue for solutions.

Research has also indicated the news media not only tell us which issues to think about, but by framing issues tell us how to think about them as well. By defining a problem as resulting from certain causes and not from others, the news media define solutions and attribute responsibility [7, 8]. Content analyses have shown that news coverage tends to frame problems as resulting from individual-level behaviors more than societal or environmental factors [7]. Participation in agenda setting and framing sets the news media's role in transmitting information and shaping the policy-making process. (See Chapter Two for further discussion of agenda-setting and framing.)

Issues relating to sexual and reproductive health have typically been left out of media messages. While the mass media are saturated with sexual imagery, frank information on consequences of sexuality or on sexual health is often lacking.

### C. Statement of the Problem

This study will analyze articles in nine national newspapers from January 1997 through April 1997 that contained at least one mention of the term sexually transmitted disease, STD, or a specific STD. The purpose of this study is to provide a baseline assessment of how the problem of STDs is being presented to the American public through the print news media.



#### D. Research Questions

This exploratory study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency with which STDs are mentioned and which sources mention them?
2. What kind of information about STDs is being provided and by which sources?
  - a. Are there identified causes, routes of transmission, consequences or signs and symptoms of STDs?
  - b. Is responsibility attributed to individuals or to organizations?
  - c. Is there a focus on any particular risk groups?
3. What are the key themes and frames associated with STDs?

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study fills a gap in the existing literature in several ways. Although there is a large volume of content analysis research of the news media, the issue of STDs in the news has not yet been studied. In terms of methods, most news media studies eliminate editorials, opinions, and letters to the editors in their sampling frames. Given that the goal of this research is to evaluate the state of public discussion surrounding STDs, this study will include the newspaper sections whose purpose it is to influence readers.

### A. News Media Content Analysis

Content analysis research draws samples of text from communication sources and subjects that communication text to fairly standard methods. Text is sampled and then coded according to a systematic classification of categories developed by the researcher. An assessment of coding reliability must be completed to satisfy requirements of objectivity. The validity and reliability of basic content analysis techniques is explicated in Holsti's (1969) Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities [9]. Researchers have attempted to distinguish between different types of content analysis, such as quantitative and qualitative methods. Lee (1998) [10] provides a review of both types of content analysis, their commonalties as well as differences in approach. Quantitative and qualitative analyses contain theoretical relevance and inference about the sender(s) of communication, its message or its audience [9, 10]. Quantitative content analysis examines manifest content, is grounded in a philosophy of objective reality, and generally attempts to enumerate content to reveal patterns or trends [9, 10]. Qualitative

content analysis examines the latent content of communication, draws inferences about communication based on attributes of messages, and attempts to explore the deeper meanings of discourse and ideological frames [9, 10]. The theoretical framework for both types of content analysis, when applied to the news media is grounded in agenda setting and framing effects.

### B. News Media, Agenda-Setting, and Framing

An agenda is a “set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time” [6, pp. 2-3]. The agenda setting process consists of the media agenda (what is covered), the public agenda (what is discussed) and the policy agenda (what issues are legislated on). The salience of an issue is its perceived importance on an agenda hierarchy. Research indicates that once an issue gains salience on the media agenda, it will shape the public agenda and thus influence the policy agenda [6].

The influence of the media agenda of the public agenda has also been extensively studied. Many content analyses have demonstrated a positive influential relationship between the news media and public opinion. Fan has conducted several studies on the influence of news media framing on setting public opinion. One study demonstrated the news media’s agenda setting effects by examining the influence of coverage on the salience of drug usage on public opinion [11]. Fan and Holway (1994) looked at news media coverage of cocaine and its impact on usage patterns [12]. Computerized analysis coupled to public opinion attributed a drop in use to anti-cocaine messages in print news available from the Associated Press. Fan and Norem (1992) used the Lexis/Nexis database coupled to computerized modeling to examine the relationship between news

media, opinion, and Medicare legislation [13]. Shifts in public opinion regarding Medicare could be predicted from positive or negative news media coverage. Fan and Hertog (1995) examined the impact of news coverage on public beliefs regarding routes of HIV transmission and found that coverage influenced beliefs concerning the likelihood of transmission via toilets, sneezing and insects [14].

Walsh-Childers (1994) developed a series of case studies from four newspapers to examine the influence of coverage on health policy development [7]. This study found three of the four case studies had limited impact on policies and identified the major factors indicated for the one instance suggesting significant policy change.

Content analysis often examines news media frames to study the debate surrounding a problem. Journalists tend to frame issues in order to simplify and make sense out of complicated issues. Research has indicated that framing effects influence public opinion. Iyengar has conducted several studies demonstrating agenda-setting and framing effects. In Is Anyone Responsible: How Television Frames Political Issues (1991), Iyengar makes the distinction between thematic and episodic reporting, and studies the influence of each on public opinion [8]. The main difference identified is that episodic frames, which depict concrete events illustrating issues, elicit responses attributing responsibility to individuals; thematic framing, which presents collective or general evidence, is associated with attributions for responsibility on broader societal causes (pp. 14-16).

Another study by Iyengar (1993) triangulated nightly news coverage, Gallup polls and National Election Studies to demonstrate agenda-setting and framing effects of news coverage of the Gulf War crisis [15]. Agenda-setting was demonstrated by level of

coverage matching the proportion of poll respondents naming the Gulf crisis as the most important national problem; framing effects were found in support for military action mirroring higher rates of episodic reporting.

Ryan, in Prime Time Activism (1991), presents a guideline for media advocates to use in studying news media framing [16]. As developed in this text and outlined again by Winett (1997), a coding scheme of descriptive categories is developed in order to illustrate frames surrounding a debate [16, 17]. This technique is commonly used by advocates to advance policy changes – by analyzing how a debate is framed in the news media, it becomes possible to reframe and redirect the debate in a different direction [18, 19].

### C. Relevant Research Methodologies

Content analysis research concerning the news media generally focuses on topics such as foreign policy, war, and political campaigns. Less media research has been done specifically on the topic of health care issues. In their analysis of newspaper coverage of tobacco issues, Menashe and Seigel (1998) used the framing matrix developed by Ryan and outlined by Winett to examine the frames and main arguments used in the tobacco debate [20]. They found the tobacco debate as conducted in the New York Times and the Washington Post to be almost evenly divided between tobacco control and tobacco interest frames. Sorenson, Peterson and Berk (1998) examined newspaper coverage and the epidemiology of homicides in the Los Angeles Times [21]. They developed a linear model to compare coverage to actual reports and found that crimes involving women, children, the elderly, strangers, and those involving wealthier neighborhoods received

more coverage than those with minority victims, involving lower socioeconomic status, non fire-arm crimes, and familiar victims. This study suggests how coverage of public health issues can misrepresent and mislead.

Jones-Webb, Baronowski, Fan, Finnegan and Wagenaar (1997) conducted a content analysis of alcohol coverage to examine policy issues in Black-oriented and mainstream newspapers [22]. Although they found more similarities than differences in terms of issues covered, they found differences in coverage of economic policies suggesting that mainstream papers reflect a more national agenda. They also found that both media outlets covered alcohol marketing issues extensively, suggesting a frame shift from one of individual responsibility to one placing responsibility with the alcohol industry.

The issue of AIDS has been extensively studied in the news media. King (1990) conducted a content analysis of coverage of women prostitutes in the New York Times and Washington Post and coded articles for degrees of representations of prostitutes as a target group for AIDS [23]. The majority of articles were categorized as having an unsympathetic rather than sympathetic tone towards prostitution. Colby and Cook (1991) looked at nightly TV news coverage and found that AIDS became an item on the news media agenda in 1987, following speculation regarding heterosexual transmission and a speech by then-President Reagan [24]. They examined the way that AIDS became framed as a crisis only after affecting more mainstream populations. Nelkin (1991) reviewed major themes reported in the news media regarding AIDS and their implications for risk reporting. She concludes that mainstream press have ignored deeper issues by paying

attention to controversy: “Media discourse helps to create the biases that underlie public policy and influence personal behavior” [25, p. 304].

Lupton (1994) conducted a discourse analysis of representations of condoms in the print news media in Australia in 1987 [26]. Articles were reviewed for content and topic and binary oppositions, metaphors, and other stylistic or rhetorical devices. Binary oppositions and metaphors were identified for their importance in “establishing relationships between objects or concepts and wider knowledge and belief systems” (p. 310). She found that negative discourses predominated during the period studied and that accounts of condoms “reflected society’s anxiety about sexual danger, about metaphorical, physical and moral contamination” (p. 317).

In Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media (1989), Kinsella provides a critical look at media coverage and journalistic treatment of AIDS in the 1980’s [27]. His examination reveals how AIDS reporting encapsulates a journalistic ethic that does not always live up to the ideal of maintaining fairness and objectivity. Kinsella recounts how reporters shied away from the epidemic until personal interest was generated by certain agenda-setting events such as the death of the actor Rock Hudson, fears of casual transmission and discussion of widespread testing.

#### D. STDs and Media Content Analysis

Very little research has been done on media depictions of STDs and there have been no published studies of STDs in news media. Existing content analyses on STDs have focused primarily on popular media, such as prime time entertainment television. These studies have found little discussion of STDs. A content analysis by Lowry and

Towles (1989), "Prime Time TV Portrayals of Sex, Contraception and Venereal Diseases" found only 18 out of 722 codable behaviors relating to STDs, and 13 of these referred to AIDS [28]. This study examined prime time programs on ABC, NBC and CBS for content relating to sexual health. The authors concluded that "network TV presentation of sexual behaviors is more a misinformation campaign than a realistic source of information that could help slow the national epidemics of pregnancies and STDs" [28]. A similar study by Olson (1994) looked at sexual content in major network TV soap operas [29]. Sexual behaviors were coded and the resulting 505 mentions included 8 mentions of AIDS; STDs received no mention whatsoever.

Roberts (1997) analyzed media accounts of herpes in popular periodicals using the Lexis/Nexis database and Reader's Guide to Periodicals [30]. He found 141 articles from 1968 to 1995 and examined these for discursive themes which included herpes as a social crisis and moral crisis, and the construction of a "herpetic" moral and sexual identity.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### A. Research Design

This study is a content analysis of articles in nine major newspapers containing at least one mention of sexually transmitted disease (or of a specific STD) appearing during a four-month time period (January through April 1998). Articles were reviewed in the Atlanta Journal/Constitution, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, the Christian Science Monitor, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. These papers were chosen because they are either recognized for their agenda setting importance or are widely circulated. The time period studied follows the Institute of Medicine's report by approximately 14-18 months and includes National STD Month (April).

### B. Selection

The Lexis/Nexus on-line news service was used to collect data. The search string included the following terms for STDs or conditions: chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, HPV, human papilloma virus, herpes, hepatitis, chancroid, trichomoniasis, STD, sexually transmitted disease, cervical cancer, genital warts, pelvic inflammatory disease. HIV and AIDS were not included in the search string and were coded only if mentioned in association with other STDs. Cervical cancer, though not an STD, was included due to its association with the human papilloma virus. Pelvic inflammatory disease was also included in the search string due to its association with chlamydia and gonorrhea.

A total of 522 articles were retrieved from the Lexis/Nexis search, and 60 articles were eliminated for being about animal disease or for being obituaries, art reviews, sports articles, or for containing the term “std” in a website address or stock option. A total group of 462 articles remained. Of these, a sub-group of 89 articles (19%) contained substantive discussion of STDs. The criteria for determining articles in the substantive group was at least one reference to the following aspects of STDs:

- Causes
- Consequences
- Prevention
- Signs or symptoms
- Screening
- Transmission
- Treatment
- Trends or rates

Reference to these aspects needed to extend beyond one sentence. Articles containing reference to cervical cancer or hepatitis met the same criteria by mentioning an association to sexual transmission in more than one sentence.

Articles were excluded from the substantive group if they mentioned STDs but did not touch on any of the substantive criteria (discussion of causes, consequences, prevention, signs or symptoms, screening, transmission, treatment, trends or rates) beyond one sentence. These were usually brief references buried in an article whose primary subject matter was not health or STD- related. Examples of articles that were excluded were articles mentioning President Clinton’s apology for the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment; articles mentioning hepatitis without mentioning the risk for sexual transmission; and biotechnology articles mentioning a new treatment or cure for cervical cancer without discussing the disease’s association to the human papilloma virus.

### C. Measures

A coding instrument was developed with explicit instructions for each category. Each article could potentially be coded for 22 variables. A preliminary screen was used to separate the substantive from non-substantive articles with only substantive articles subject to full coding. The 89 articles in the substantive group were coded for specific information on causes, consequences, routes of transmission, signs/symptoms, person(s) quoted and demographic focus. A randomly selected subset of 110 articles were double-coded and submitted for inter-coder reliability checking. Reliability using Scott's Pi coefficient ranged from .75 to 1 with an average of 92%.

### D. Quantitative Analysis

The data were entered on the coding instrument using a Filemaker database. Descriptives and frequencies were run on all of the variables. Tables on key variables were created as part of our preliminary analysis. The descriptive data in this study were analyzed to provide an overall picture of STDs in the news. Future analyses should look more closely at a broader range of questions regarding coverage of STDs in the print news media.

### E. Qualitative Framing Analysis

All 89 substantive were read in-depth by two researchers. Content frames were developed and compared using established templates [16, 17]. The coding scheme used

was originally developed by Ryan and uses descriptive categories to illustrate frames.

The conceptual categories used are as follows:

- Core position: Main argument that evidence in the article supports.
- Metaphor: Analogy used to support the core position.
- Catch phrase: Remains in the mind of the audience.
- Visual image: Paints a picture of the problem.
- Source: Who is attributed with responsibility for the problem.
- Outcome: What will happen if the problem is allowed to continue.
- Appeal to principle: Widely valued ideal to support the core position.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### A. General Data Trends

A preliminary examination of the data revealed the following four trends:

1. Articles were written in response to published reports and publicized campaigns. A prominent example of this trend is the coverage of the human papilloma virus (HPV). Twenty-five articles mentioned HPV in addition to other STDs or in the broader context of STDs; 8 articles focused primarily on HPV, and 6 of these were about one study, published by the New England Journal of Medicine, which tracked HPV for three years on a New Jersey college campus. Other articles also mentioned scientific journals, studies by Planned Parenthood and the Kaiser Family Foundation, and campaigns by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Liver Foundation.
2. Articles were published in response to National STD Awareness Month (April). A total of 15 articles, roughly 17% of the substantive group, were written specifically in responses to STD Awareness Month, and all but one of these was published by the Los Angeles Times.
3. Specific STDs were characterized uniquely. Herpes, for example, was consistently characterized as a common infection and also as a source of shame. The headline of one advice column read, “My Boyfriend Left Me with Herpes and with Debts”. The author of this column gave her reader the following advice: “Dump him and have a party. They won’t announce it at the door, but your guests will be likely to include some of the 50 million people with the virus who are being loved and accepted on an epidemic scale.” (Chicago Tribune, March, 1998.) Chlamydia was consistently

referred to as the “stealth bomber of STDs” because of its clinically silent behavior and the fact that many women are not aware they are infected until they begin to suffer from serious long-term complications such as pelvic inflammatory disease.

4. The use of militaristic imagery was common and central to many of the articles.

Chlamydia was commonly referred to as the “stealth bomber of STDs”. Hepatitis C was referred to as a “stealth virus”, one that needs “weapons of prevention” used against it. Teens and STDs were discussed in the context of a battlefield: “We must form a front in the fight against teen sexuality”, “we’re not winning the war against teen sex”, and “we need to call in additional troops”. And STDs in general were characterized in militaristic terms: “The CDC is to combat infections”, “there is a war on STDs”, and “we are fighting sexual disease”.

B. Descriptive Results

Table 1: Distribution of Articles by Source

<i>Newspaper Source</i>	<i>Total Group n = 462</i>	<i>Substantive Group n = 89</i>
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	23 %	26 %
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	18 %	24 %
<i>Atlanta Journal Constitution</i>	14 %	17 %
<i>New York Times</i>	14 %	9 %
<i>Boston Globe</i>	10 %	14 %
<i>Washington Post</i>	12 %	7 %
<i>USA Today</i>	8 %	5 %
<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>	0.2 %	0 %
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	0 %	0 %

The LA Times and the Chicago Tribune together accounted for more than 40% of articles in the total group, and 50% of articles with more substantive discussion of STDs.

The Christian Science Monitor contained only one article that mentioned STDs, and the

Wall Street Journal had none. USA Today, the paper with the largest circulation in the United States, accounted for only 5% of articles in the substantive group.

Table 2: Distribution of Articles by Type

<i>Article Type</i>	<i>Total Group n = 462</i>	<i>Substantive Group n = 89</i>
<i>News</i>	59 %	51 %
<i>News brief</i>	19 %	17 %
<i>Advice column</i>	7 %	15 %
<i>Letter to the editor</i>	7 %	8 %
<i>Column</i>	5 %	6 %
<i>Editorial</i>	2 %	3 %
<i>Other</i>	1 %	0 %

News-content articles (news and news briefs) constituted the majority of articles in both the total group the substantive group. Advice columns were much better represented in articles with substantive discussion of STDs than in the total group. Opinion pieces such as editorials, letters to the editor and columns were the least likely to address the issue of STDs in a general or substantive way.

Table 3: Distribution of Articles by Primary Subject

<i>Primary Subject</i>	<i>Total Group n = 462</i>	<i>Substantive Group n = 89</i>
<i>Current social issues</i>	46 %	28 %
<i>Broader health issues</i>	16 %	5 %
<i>STDs</i>	11 %	54 %
<i>Biotechnology or business</i>	11 %	2 %
<i>Hepatitis</i>	8 %	3 %
<i>HIV/AIDS</i>	6 %	7 %
<i>Cervical cancer</i>	1 %	1 %

Most of the articles in the total group focused on current social issues as their primary subject matter. These are articles describing social or political topics unrelated to specified healthcare issues. (For example, an article might focus on homeless youth and mention STDs as a risk factor.) Articles with STDs as their primary focus made up slightly more than 10% of the total group and accounted for a majority of the articles in the substantive group.

Table 4: Distribution of Articles by STD or Associated Condition

<i>STD/Condition</i>	<i>Substantive Group</i>	<i>STD/Condition</i>	<i>Substantive Group</i>
	<i>n = 89</i>		<i>n = 89</i>
<i>STDs/venereal diseases</i>	72 %	<i>Herpes type 2/genital</i>	11 %
<i>HIV/AIDS</i>	43 %	<i>Hepatitis</i>	8 %
<i>Chlamydia</i>	29 %	<i>Parasites</i>	8 %
<i>HPV/genital warts</i>	28 %	<i>Trichomonas</i>	5 %
<i>Syphilis</i>	28 %	<i>Herpes type 1/oral</i>	3 %
<i>Gonorrhea</i>	25 %	<i>Hepatitis C</i>	3 %
<i>Cervical cancer</i>	20 %	<i>Vaginitis</i>	2 %
<i>Herpes/herpes simplex</i>	19 %	<i>Hepatitis A</i>	2 %
<i>Hepatitis B</i>	14 %	<i>Chancroid</i>	2 %

Reference to the term “STD” or to STDs in general was by far the most frequent mention made, accounting for almost 75% of the substantive articles. Reference to HIV or AIDS was the second most frequent, as almost half the substantive articles mentioned these in addition to other STDs. Herpes, gonorrhea, cervical cancer, syphilis, human papilloma virus and chlamydia were mentioned by 19% to 29% of the articles. Hepatitis B was mentioned in association with sexual transmission much more frequently than hepatitis A or C (14% compared to 2% and 3%).



Table 5: Distribution of Articles by Information Type

<i>Type of Information</i>	<i>Substantive Group</i>
	<i>n = 89</i>
<i>Consequences</i>	57 %
<i>Routes of transmission</i>	40 %
<i>Causes</i>	38 %
<i>Signs or symptoms</i>	36 %

In the substantive group, 57% of the articles mentioned consequences of STDs. The most frequent consequence mentioned was the potential for infecting others, followed by pregnancy complications and neonatal complications. Less than one-half of the articles discussed routes of transmission, causes, or signs and symptoms. While 40% of the articles mentioned that routes of transmission existed, specific routes were identified less than 25% of the time.

Table 6: Distribution of Articles by Action Category

<i>Action Type</i>	<i>Substantive Group</i>
	<i>n = 89</i>
<i>What actions do people need to take?</i>	61 %
<i>What actions do organizations need to take?</i>	42 %

More than 60% of the substantive articles make some recommendation regarding actions that people should take. The most frequent suggestions were to use condoms, get tested for STDs or to simply abstain. Individual organizations were less like to be called

on to do something. When organizations were called on to do something, outreach, education and prevention programs were the most frequent actions cited.

Table 7: Distribution of Articles by Person Quoted

<i>Person Quoted</i>	<i>Substantive Group</i>
	<i>n = 89</i>
<i>No quotes</i>	<b>66 %</b>
<i>Advocate/lobbyist</i>	<b>16 %</b>
<i>Health-related government official</i>	<b>15 %</b>
<i>Researcher</i>	<b>11 %</b>
<i>Health professional</i>	<b>9 %</b>
<i>Youth</i>	<b>4 %</b>
<i>Parent</i>	<b>3 %</b>
<i>Politician/Legislator</i>	<b>2 %</b>
<i>Person with STD</i>	<b>1 %</b>
<i>Business person</i>	<b>1 %</b>
<i>Other</i>	<b>1 %</b>
<i>Educator/teacher</i>	<b>0 %</b>

Two-thirds of substantive articles contained no quotes at all. When quotes were used, it was most frequently from an advocate or lobbyist (representative from a non-profit organization, an activist or a community leader) or a health-related government official (federal, state or local government official affiliated with health care).

Table 8: Distribution of Articles by Group Focus and Groups at Risk

<i>Focus or Group(s) Mentioned</i>	<i>Substantive Group</i>
	<i>n = 89</i>
<i>Risk groups identified</i>	<b>69 %</b>
<i>Youth focus</i>	<b>36 %</b>
<i>Gender focus</i>	<b>27 %</b>
<i>Race/ethnicity focus</i>	<b>5 %</b>

Thirty-six percent of the articles contained a primary focus on youth. Articles in this category contained an in-depth look at a specific youth problem, such as teen sexuality or teen pregnancy, sex education in high schools, or prevention strategies for youth. Fewer articles contained a focus on a specific gender or racial/ethnic group. A large percentage (69%) of substantive articles mentioned specific groups at risk for STDs without providing a primary focus on these groups. For example, an article on the dangers of STDs might mention in one sentence that a specific group is more at risk. In these articles, youth, women and young women were most frequently referred to as risk groups.

### C. Framing Results

Examination of framing in the data provides an estimation of the arguments used to debate an issue. A majority of frames identified in articles dealt with issues concerning young people and STDs. These frames illustrate debates regarding ways to prevent STDs

in young people and who should hold ultimate responsibility for prevention in this age group.

Frame 1: STDs as Youth Problem (the Atlanta Journal/Constitution, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune)

Core position: The majority of new STD infections occur in young people.

Catch phrase: “Sex minus condoms equals today’s teen STD epidemic”.

Visual image: Teens are having sex and placing themselves at risk for STDs in higher and higher numbers.

Source: Teens are susceptible due to misconceptions, lack of knowledge, risk-taking behaviors and sexual images in the media.

Outcome: Health impact of STDs devastating to teens entering reproductive years.

Appeal to principle: Youth need protection.

Frame 2a: Comprehensive Sex Education for Prevention (the Boston Globe)

Core position: Full disclosure needed to make responsible decisions.

Catch-phrase: “Abhor ignorance not sex”.

Visual image: If you’re on a diet and you slip and eat a piece of cake, there are opportunities to start over...there’s no margin of error with sexual mistakes.

Source: Abstinence-only education is a political ploy by ultraconservative politicians; teaching shame and guilt is an ineffective way of reaching teens.

Outcome: Teaching teens to abstain without backup information is extremely dangerous and ultimately ineffective.

Appeal to principle: Information is power.

Frame 2b: Abstinence-Only Sex Education for Prevention (the Boston Globe)

Core position: All sides of the debate should agree that abstinence isn't controversial.

Metaphor: Giving kids condoms is like teaching them traffic laws and then giving them radar detectors, or teaching them to say no to drugs and handing them a pack of needles.

Catch phrase: "This is a point on which all sides of the debate should agree".

Visual image: Healthy independent abstaining youth.

Source: Giving teens information about sex gives them the go-ahead to have sex, as well as a false sense of security.

Outcome: Giving teens information about sex can only lead to increased sexual activity and greater rates of STDs.

Appeal to principle: Moral strength.

Frame 3a: Vaccinate Young People for Hepatitis B (the Los Angeles Times)

Core position: Hepatitis B is preventable but deadly and kids are especially at risk.

Metaphor: Hepatitis is like HIV because it is as slow and painful a disease.

Catch phrase: "Hepatitis B spreads like HIV but is 100 times more contagious".

Visual image: Kids are walking around unaware of their risk.

Source: Parents shouldn't assume their kids aren't at risk.

Outcome: Hepatitis B will spread if we don't contain it with vaccinations.

Appeal to principle: Awareness for prevention.

Frame 3b: Don't Vaccinate for Hepatitis B (the Los Angeles Times)

Core position: Parents feel too few children contract to justify cost of mandatory vaccinations.

Metaphor: Parents have behaving like good soldiers with regard to vaccines for last two decades.

Catch phrase: "Enough is enough".

Visual image: Parents are drawing a line in the sand by fighting move to vaccinate.

Source: Parents must fight the trend to vaccinate without enough research to support.

Outcome: If parents don't stand up for their rights children will suffer adverse effects.

Appeal to principle: Protect family rights.

Frame 4a: Close Teen Clinics (the Atlanta Journal/Constitution, the Boston Globe)

Core position: Handing out condoms won't prevent STDs but will undermine parental control.

Catch phrase: "Don't support the safe sex banner".

Visual image: Dangerous and slippery slope of transferring power from parents to unaccountable government agency.

Source: Government funded agencies promoting teen sexual behavior.

Outcome: Unsuspecting parents have to deal with greater consequences of teen sexual activity.

Appeal to principle: Parental authority.

Frame 4b: Keep Teen Clinics Open (the Atlanta Journal/Constitution, the Boston Globe)

Core position: Clinics providing reproductive health services to teens are essential in the fight against STDs.

Metaphor: It's as if we're losing the war against the consequences of teen sexual activity.

Catch phrase: "We can't oppose a center that might prevent even one girl from contracting a STD?"

Visual image: It's time to call in additional troops (troops like Teen Plus Clinics).

Source: Officials want to halt state funding to keep teen services available.

Outcome: Closing clinics will lead to further increases in teen STD rates.

Appeal to principle: Mobilize clinics to help parents and the church fight STDs.

Frame 5: Beware of Hepatitis C (the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times)

Core position: U.S. needs to wake up to the threat of this tenacious virus.

Metaphor: It is like a stealth virus, a shadow epidemic and a simmering epidemic.

Catch phrase: "People must pay attention to this threat".

Visual image: Many people are walking around feeling healthy but are infected.

Source: Many people at risk are unaware of the disease.

Outcome: Annual death toll will triple and far surpass AIDS if prevention efforts fail.

Appeal to principle: Call to action.

Frame 6a: Don't Cover Chlamydia Screening for Women (the Atlanta Journal/Constitution)

Core position: Covering screening drives up cost of insurance coverage.

Metaphor: Believing in the benefits of screening is like believing in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy.

Catch phrase: "Anytime there's an increase in coverage there's an increase in cost".

Visual image: Hard-working people struggling to keep up with rising costs.

Source: Women's health advocates are driving up costs of health coverage.

Outcome: Mandates that raise costs will force people to drop coverage.

Appeal to principle: Protection of consumer rights.

Frame 6b: Cover Chlamydia Screening for Women (the Atlanta Journal/Constitution)

Core position: Covering the cost of screening is the right thing to do and is cost-effective in the long run.

Metaphor: Chlamydia is the stealth bomber of STDs because most women don't know they're infected.

Catch phrase: "The way it acts and the way it's regarded is equally as silent".

Visual image: Chlamydia is a preventable disaster in women's health.

Source: Insurers won't cover cost of screening; policy makers unaware of impact.

Outcome: Serious complications of undetected infections.

Appeal to principle: Cost-benefit suggests resulting health threat is too costly.



Frame 7: Urban Decay Spreads STDs (the New York Times)

Core position: Previously a problem of the inner city, spreading to more affluent areas.

Metaphor: Contamination of the innocent.

Catch phrase: “It’s (STD epidemic) a real wake-up call”.

Visual image: Crack fuels sex-for-drug trading and spreads disease; tearing down housing projects breaks up sexual networks and scatters carriers.

Source: Conspiracy of silence has allowed epidemic to flourish.

Outcome: If people don’t begin to pay attention and increase funding to STD clinics, more and more will be affected.

Appeal to principle: Protect the innocent victim.

Frame 8: Communicate with Health-Care Providers

Core position: Doctors reluctant to take sexual histories and patients embarrassed to ask.

Metaphor: Opening Pandora’s box.

Catch phrase: “Ironic in a society that is awash with sexual messages that frank discussion about sexuality is avoided”.

Visual image: Sexual images everywhere but people won’t talk about sex.

Source: Sex is used to titillate but not as topic for frank discussions.

Outcome: If we don’t overcome our cultural biases against frank sexual discussions, we will continue to miss a lot.

Appeal to principle: Power of communication.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

A critical step in addressing the exceptionally high rates of sexually transmitted disease in the U.S. is breaking the silence that surrounds this issue. Only when STDs are openly confronted can we begin to seek solutions. As one expert has stated, “much of the American public is not even aware that there is an epidemic” (Judy Wasserheit, CDC). The news media determine which issues are discussed and thus play an important role in setting public and policy agendas. In order for our society to effectively address the STD epidemic, causes and policy options need to be communicated through the news.

### A. Findings

Our findings show a low level of print news media coverage of STDs. A Lexis/Nexis search during the same time period for the term “HIV” yielded 622 articles mentioning HIV without reference to any other STDs. Although the term “AIDS” could not be used in the search without retrieving non-infectious disease related definitions, the fact that a search for “HIV” alone yielded so many articles reflects the attention that AIDS, not other STDs, has received in the news media. Another Lexis/Nexis search was conducted for the exact same time period during the previous four years, using the exact same search string used in the study, in order to compare levels of coverage. This search reflected a subtly fluctuating but relatively steady level of coverage: 1994 – 575; 1995 – 649; 1996 – 416; 1997 – 592; 1998 – 522.

Of particular concern are the relatively small numbers of articles in major newspapers that cover more substantive aspects of the problem of STDs. Most striking is

the fact that only 19% of articles in the total sample contained any substantive discussion of STDs. Just 3 out of 9 papers accounted for two-thirds of all substantive coverage. There was very little coverage on the editorial pages, the section of the paper policy-makers read to assess public concern about an issue. STDs, when referred to, are most often referred to in general terms, and specific diseases are far less likely to be discussed.

In the group of 89 substantive articles, less than half the articles covered routes of transmission, causes or signs or symptoms of STDs. The suggestions for organizations and individuals largely focused on which actions individuals need to take and less often on which actions organizations need to take. This discrepancy reflects a lack of attention to larger policy or social issues needed to address prevention. Remarkably, two-thirds of the substantive articles contained no quotes from any health professional or other person involved in this issue. Only 15% of the substantive articles included a quote from a government-related health official and less than 10% quoted a health professional. Just over 10% of the articles contained a quote from someone involved in researching the issue. Quotations serve as an indicator of the depth of investigative journalism – when journalists perceive a problem as being important, they seek out credible sources for their opinions. A lack of quotes may reflect a lack of concern about the seriousness of the problem of STDs.

The majority of frames that emerged from the data concern youth and family issues as they relate to STDs: Sex education (abstinence versus comprehensive), vaccinations for hepatitis B, and reproductive health care for teens were the major debated issues. Examination of these frames can have implications for media advocates wanting to reframe debates to advance specific policy initiatives. Most of the frames

regarding policy issues – whether or not to cover chlamydia screening for women, sex education and reproductive health services for teens – were debated in regional papers such as the Boston Globe and the Atlanta Journal/Constitution. The only frame that came specifically from the New York Times, the newspaper cited for its national agenda-setting importance, concerned urban decay and the spread of STDs beyond the inner city.

### B. Conclusions

Based on our findings, we can draw the following conclusions:

- Given the extent of the problem there was relatively little coverage of STDs.
- When articles did discuss STDs in depth, they tended to focus on individual responsibility and not on larger policy and social issues related to causes and consequences of STDs.
- Frames were concerned with regional issues and did not reflect cohesive nationwide concern for the issues surrounding STDs.

### D. Implications

This research documents the lack of attention in the print media to a very significant public health issue. It points to the importance of public health professionals developing a more concerted effort to achieve coverage of STD issues in the news media. Public health professionals must commit themselves to developing news media strategies in order to keep this issue on the media agenda and thereby on the public agenda. By placing the issue of STDs on the public agenda we can begin to make strides to discuss and

develop policies and programs to more effectively address sexually transmitted disease as a society.

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