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Medical Disinformation: Niche-market Targeting in the Black Press during the AIDS Epidemic

Power of the Black Press

The Black Press is a sector of American media that is critical to understanding the scope of AIDS information available to African Americans from the 1980s to the early 1990s. The primary goals of the Black Press at this time were speaking on racial topics, celebrating achievements in the Black community, and reporting on news relevant to the black community (Campbell, Jenkins, and Brown 2011). The viability of positive reception of information among a target audience, in this case the African American community, depends on a sense of relationship between the media source and its consumers. This phenomenon has been coined as niche-market targeting (Freelon and Wells 2020).

Amsterdam News is a particularly notable constituent of the Black Press due to its immense popularity and influence in the Black community. Furthermore, in comparison to other Black Press publications, Amsterdam News curated slightly more information pertaining to AIDS in their articles and, therefore, took a larger role in the dissemination of knowledge during the epidemic. Amsterdam News and other Black Press publications have been a primary source of information for the Black-American community throughout time because the mainstream media often did not speak on pressing issues in their community, nor did its content strive to encapsulate the Black experience as publications in the Black Press did—leading to Black Americans seeking out these publications over mainstream media (Campbell, Jenkins, and Brown 2011).

The power and influence of the Black Press in the African American community led to the establishment of Amsterdam News as a constituting source of AIDS knowledge in the community. To the publication's fault, however, information dissemination began as a way to shield the Black community from potential pathologization from AIDS diagnoses rather than provide them with the necessary information to avoid the contraction of AIDS. As a result, the information published falls into the category of disinformation through the application of modern disinformation definitions to this historical case study.

Application of Modern Theories to a Historical Framework

- Niche-market Targeting- *Producers of knowledge publish information that targets "identity solidarity" over "informed discourse"* (Freelon and Wells 2020).
- Disinformation- *False information shared with the knowledge that it is untruthful* (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017).
- Conspiracy Theory- *A form of disinformation in which events and phenomena are seemingly connected to or caused by "powerful actors who conceal their role to dupe regular people"* (Toal and O'Loughlin 2017).

Medical Disinformation in the Black Press

To track the types of information published by Amsterdam News over time, I began by analyzing articles from the time period 1983 to 1987. A November 1985 article titled "Link AIDS to CIA Warfare" reports on a conspiracy theory proposed by Dr. Nathaniel S. Lehman attributing the emergence of AIDS in both Africa and among American gay men to the U.S Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ("Link AIDS to CIA Warfare" 1985). These assertions were undoubtedly false because in 1983, before the article was published, the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was determined to be the cause of AIDS (Sharp and Hahn 2011). This conspiracy theory was easily considered as truth by the Black community as their trust in American institutions was extremely low in the 1980s due to civil rights issues and movements.

In the same article, Amsterdam News details Lehrman's statement that "non-infectious factors" are the main cause of AIDS, not the "immune suppression of the relatively mild virus (HIV)" ("Link AIDS to CIA Warfare" 1985). This information, however, is deliberate disinformation as HIV is an extremely infectious disease that weakens the immune system. In this weakened state, an HIV diagnosis is then labeled as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Disinformation about the immunodeficiency aspect of AIDS is also noted in other Amsterdam News articles. In September 1985, an article titled "Scientist says proper diet can cure AIDS?" details how certain foods can heal as well as prevent AIDS (Cohen 1999). By publishing this disinformation over providing truthful prevention methods, such as not sharing drug injection equipment and participating in protected sex, the Amsterdam News places a dangerous, false narrative in the minds of their readers and places them at a larger risk for unknowingly contracting AIDS.

Expert Response to AIDS

General Koop wrote and released a comprehensive report on AIDS in 1986 to 107 million households in America (Koop 1986). In this address to the American public, he aims to dissipate the extreme hysteria surrounding the disease as well as provide treatment and prevention methods. To combat the rampant pathologization of AIDS and the minority communities majorly affected by it, he details that "your age doesn't matter. Neither does your race, religion, hometown, or gender. No matter who you are or where you live, it's possible you know somebody who has HIV infection or AIDS or may be at risk..." (Koop 1986). This quote dismisses harmful preconceptions that only Black people, gay people, and other marginalized groups can have AIDS. This idea is damaging to everyone in America during this time because the marginalized groups are ostracized, ridiculed, and become afraid to seek out treatment.

In 1985, Dr. Norma J. Goodwin founded "Health Watch", a health education organization that targets prevalent diseases in the Black American community ("New Health Care Concept to Help Nation's Blacks" 1985). As it became evident that AIDS overwhelmingly affected the African American community, Health Watch began to produce AIDS information that the community could trust, considering the source was dedicated to the health of Black people. In a December 1987 article, Dr. Goodwin states that deficient AIDS prevention efforts in minority communities will lead to an overwhelming amount of death, further adding that HIV contraction is preventable (Lambert 1987). Rather than reproduce conspiracy theories that frame AIDS as inevitable in the African American population, the prevention efforts undertaken by Health Watch as well as her various public appeals have given this community comprehensive AIDS education and thwarted the disinformation intertwined with Amsterdam News' reporting.

AIDS' Portrayal in the Black Press After Expert Response

In November 1987, an article titled "The AIDS Controversy in America" was published ("The AIDS Controversy in America" 1985). Rowland directly mentions the increase of public campaigns that aim to slow the spread of AIDS and goes on to mention a statement produced by U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop stating that after abstinence from sex, using condoms is the best protection against the disease (1985). This type of conversation is more productive for combating the AIDS epidemic than discussing conspiracy theories or spreading blatant disinformation among the Black community. The article mentions this statement directly, which provides education for readers who are able to comprehend the advice given by General Koop. In addition to this, reference to General Koop proves that writers and editors from the Black press are seeking out experts to collect information from, which shapes the content they report on.

Dr. Norma J. Goodwin was referenced in a December 1987 article titled "Group launches war on the AIDS epidemic" ("Group launches war on the AIDS epidemic" 1987). In this article, the writer discusses an AIDS in the Black population information seminar sponsored by Health Watch. Furthermore, the piece contains a direct statement from Dr. Goodwin about the increased prevalence of AIDS in minority communities which is supported by a breakdown of AIDS cases in American Black and Hispanic populations provided by the article writer (1987). With this information, readers of the Amsterdam News become more eager to seek out further information to protect themselves and their families. Along with this, it dispels rumors that AIDS is a 'gay disease' and enforces that everyone needs to be aware of the activities that may be placing them at risk

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Image: <https://www.aidshealth.org/2017/02/photos-ahf-holds-keep-promise-concert-march-ft-lauderdale-recognition-national-black-hiv-aids-awareness-day/>