

African-American blogs offer key health communications tool

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Blogs allow African Americans to discuss HIV and AIDS in an unfiltered way that is both public and private, according to a Penn State researcher, and this exploration may lead to another way to distribute health messages to the African American community.

Lynette Kvasny, associate professor of information sciences and technology (IST), an avid blog reader, noticed an interesting conversation on a blog following an August 2006 ABC News story, "Out of Control: AIDS in Black America."

"I was really surprised by some of the things I was reading ... these were things that I'd never seen discussed in a public forum before," Kvasny said.

Kvasny and C. Frank Igwe, a recent IST Ph.D. recipient, analyzed 128 responses to the ABC News story posted from Aug. 24 to Aug. 26, 2006. They separated the comments into themes, including ineffective Black community leadership; the influence of prison and hip-hop cultures; religion; sexual taboos; and African Americans in the media. These categories provided a basis to analyze how ethnic identities are conveyed through technology.

The television show pointed to five reasons why AIDS is out of control in Black America, including, those in charge do not see the problem; the government fails to control street drugs and the large African American prison population; the skewed ratio of men to women in the African

American community lead to multiple partners for men; a hidden African American homosexual population on the "down low;" and the failure of leadership in the Black community to make AIDS a priority.

"Online conversations provide an opportunity to examine how this community uses language to express their unique position as subjects in HIV/AIDS discourse," the researchers note in "An African-American Weblog Community's Reading of AIDS in Black America," published recently in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. "The relationships among identity, language and computer mediated communication are not straightforward."

Kvasny also noted the varying levels of community that exist within the blog, saying that while individual users are anonymous, they are all united by a common language and a desire to speak out about HIV/AIDS and other issues affecting the Black community. Blogs and message boards also allow people to voice their own opinions, rather than being spoken for by one or several people in the mass media.

"Communities like this give people a place to talk about things they couldn't talk about elsewhere," Kvasny said. "The affordances of technology allow people to become members of a virtual community while still remaining anonymous and being able to freely express their thoughts."

The researchers looked at two aspects of the online conversation. First are the factors that the blog members thought contributed to the spread of AIDS in the African American population. Included in this were members' presentation of opposing, alternative views to the television report and how they presented those views. Second, the researchers looked for indications of Black communication styles including signifying, emotional intensity and computer-mediated communication techniques like emoticons and turn taking.

An analysis of the blog suggested that three things -- ineffective leadership, Black cultural practices and individual behaviors -- were the risk factors for the Black community. Also, analysis of how ideas were expressed showed communication interaction used call-and-response conventions such as acknowledging prior comments by naming the speaker or co-signing the previous comments. The community of bloggers developed shorthand terms for AIDS that were used by the group and emotion, in the form of capitalized comments and other verbal scolding, appeared frequently.

The use of screen names and family terms showed communal support. The acts of advising, consoling and testifying through stories create a community of support through the discussion. The final style element of this African American blogging community involves movement, if only virtual. These include describing actions that would normally be acted out, describing dances, singing lyrics and laughter.

The researchers suggest that African Americans form virtual communities with ethnic identity through the use of language, noting "These self avowed identities suggest that ethnicity is an essential characteristic that finds expression in a public realm."

While realizing that the online community does not reach the entire African-American community, the researchers believe discussions online may impact the larger community as well through interactions with friends and relative who are not online and provide an alternative approach to community health education.

Kvasny said she hopes to continue this research and examine whether blogs are an effective medium for medical practitioners to distribute messages about HIV/AIDS prevention and education.

Source: Penn State

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