



CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

WHAT'S NEWS: PERSPECTIVES ON HIV/AIDS ADVOCACY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

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CSSR Working Paper No. 37



Published by the Centre for Social Science Research
University of Cape Town
2003

Copies of this publication may be obtained from:

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Price in Southern Africa (incl. VAT and postage): R 15.00

or it can be downloaded from our website
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ISBN: 0-7992-2193-7

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RESEARCH

Aids and Society Research Unit

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May 2003

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Abstract

This paper explores stakeholders' views regarding the question of whether HIV/AIDS coverage in the South African media should be the product of media advocacy and a proactive agenda for contributing to social change. Twenty-seven newspaper editors, journalists and other key stakeholders with a vested interest in HIV/AIDS coverage in the print media were interviewed during the course of 2002. Two overriding issues were raised by informants for consideration. These were, firstly, the need to balance the journalistic objectives of (a) advocacy and (b) neutrality and, secondly, the need to balance the objectives of (a) advocacy and (b) news value and profitability. Findings suggest that reticence regarding the adoption of an explicit advocacy role regarding HIV/AIDS has much to do with the media's evolving relationship with the post-apartheid government and its controversial approach to HIV/AIDS.

Additional index words: editorial policy, news values.

Introduction

HIV/AIDS is a critical social issue which is now routinely addressed in the South African news media (Shepperson, 2000; Schneider, 2001). Wallack and Dorfman argue that the news media of any country influences public health policy. Arguably, this is as true of South Africa as it is elsewhere. According to Usdin, public health battles in South Africa are increasingly fought 'on the 10pm news, the front pages, the financial section and on talk radio' (2001: 1).

Wallack and Dorfman argue that news media promotes collective action and policy change. News media therefore fulfils a complementary role to mass media health communication campaigns, which tend to have a primary focus on increasing personal knowledge and changing individual behaviour (Wallack & Dorfman, 2001). A considerable body of research has demonstrated that the use of mass media campaigns in health promotion is expensive, and largely ineffective (Hertog & Fan, 1995; Nelkin, 1995; Wallack *et al*, 1993). The

growing questioning of the value of media-based public health communication has in part been based on the understanding that community-based initiatives are more effective than mass media education (LeBlanc, 1993; Lyttleton, 1995). There has also been growing debate over differing approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention and an increasing emphasis on addressing the underlying issues of discrimination, poverty and marginalisation, which are seen to drive individual behaviour and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the first place (Hertog & Fan, 1995; PANOS institute, 2001). It is argued that news media advocacy, rather than health information communication, can influence the larger issues that create an environment determining individual behaviour (Wallack et al, 1993; Falobi & Babinbetan, 2000).

This understanding of the role of media in the promotion of public health is especially useful when applied to the news media's advocacy role in relation to HIV/AIDS. This role involves more than educating the public regarding appropriate individual behaviour and includes the promotion of social change and collective action. More specifically, it includes the promotion of government policy designed to facilitate a socio-economic environment conducive to behaviour change and to managing the impact of HIV/AIDS over the long term (Stein, 2002).

This view of the role of the news media, which includes the promotion of social change and collective action, is not, however, generally ascribed to by media practitioners themselves. Journalists shy away from adopting an overtly proactive response to HIV advocacy on the grounds that they must remain neutral and objective commentators (Falobi and Babingbetan, 2000). It has been argued that this results in the failure of the media to use its influence in AIDS policy-making and agenda-setting (Backstrom & Robins, 1998). Much of the research conducted on the representation of HIV/AIDS in the mass media in South Africa thus far has focused on media content *per se* and has been critical of the media's limited impact as a social change-agent. Thus, although HIV/AIDS is now routinely addressed in the South African news media, it has been argued that the interests of the state and ruling political party dominate South African media coverage (Cullinan, 2001; Shepperson, 2000). It has also been maintained that South African HIV/AIDS coverage is dependent upon the 'news values' associated with HIV/AIDS, rather than being the product of media advocacy and a proactive agenda for contributing to social change (Gevisser, 1995; Parker *et al* 1998). The concept of news value describes the 'value' which a potential buyer ascribes to a story (Parker, 1995). While news values increase profits, media advocacy is intended to achieve social change (Beauchamp, 1976; Chinai, 1996; Mann, 1997).

The research presented in this paper attempts to clarify the views of those involved in the production and evaluation of news themselves. More specifically, this paper outlines the views of key stakeholders regarding whether or not HIV/AIDS coverage in the South African media context should indeed be the product of a proactive agenda for contributing to social change.

Research Methodology

This research was designed to inform an AIDS Media Advocacy project implemented by the Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) which involves an ongoing process of engagement with media practitioners in South Africa.

Five influential South African newspapers (national and regional) from different media corporate groups, including those with the largest circulation, were chosen for in-depth analysis. An attempt was made to include newspapers targeting a variety of different population groups, as defined by race and class, across South Africa. A minimum of two in-depth interviews (lasting from one to two hours each) with journalists and editors was conducted at each newspaper.

Interviews were conducted with the following key informants:

- *News media gatekeepers*: editors, news editors, and sub-editors who make daily decisions about newspaper content;
- *News media practitioners*: journalists who investigate and write about HIV/AIDS;
- *News media stakeholders*: key role-players in non-governmental organisations and government with a vested interest in HIV/AIDS coverage in the media.

A total of 27 interviews were conducted during the first half of 2001. Although the quotations provided in the body of this report are anonymous, the referencing system tells readers whether quotations come from journalists, editors or stakeholders outside of the media sector. Thus, all quotations are labelled as follows: Journalists: J1- J12; Editors: E1- E6; Stakeholders: S1- S9.

In-depth interviews were exploratory and semi-structured. This was in order to allow for the emergence of new insights into the issues at stake in HIV/AIDS

news reporting. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed in accordance with the grounded theory methodology for qualitative data analysis outlined by Glazer and Strauss (1967).

The sample used in this study was not designed to be exhaustive. Rather than covering as many different informants as possible utilising a survey technique, an attempt was made to explore and understand the various contextual factors influencing media advocacy in a limited number of cases, through a detailed exploration of the views of those with a vested interest in the print media's coverage of HIV/AIDS.

The historical context of HIV/AIDS media advocacy in South Africa has been unusual and will be briefly outlined before the findings of this study are presented.

The Context of HIV/AIDS Reporting in South Africa

The question of the media's advocacy role in relation to HIV/AIDS in the South African context is complicated by the extent of the political controversy caused by the South African president Thabo Mbeki's views on HIV/AIDS and the implications of these views for HIV/AIDS policy across the country. In April 2000, President Mbeki wrote a letter to United States President Bill Clinton, the United Nations and the World Health Organisation defending his right to question the link between HIV and AIDS. Thereafter, Mbeki invited an International Panel of both 'dissident' and 'orthodox' scientists to meet in South Africa to discuss the link between HIV and AIDS. Despite fears of a boycott to protest against President Mbeki's stance, South Africa hosted the XIIIth International AIDS Conference in Durban during the year 2000. More than 5000 scientists signed an open pre-conference document called the 'Durban Declaration' affirming that HIV causes AIDS. Dr Mamphela Ramphele, the World Bank's managing director-designate of human development, described Mbeki's actions as 'irresponsibility that borders on criminality' (Cullinan & Thom, 2000: 3). Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang responded at the conference by claiming that criticism of Mbeki's handling of the debate was simply the media bad-mouthing the black government. There have been ongoing examples of government officials labelling those critical of Mbeki's stance as being both anti-government and racist (Cullinan, 2001). Since September 2001, President Mbeki has ceased to air his AIDS dissident views publicly, but has consistently continued to downplay the importance of HIV/AIDS as a national priority and to emphasis the necessity of addressing poverty as the 'cause' of

AIDS. More importantly, the South African Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, has continued to delay the implementation of mother-to-child-prevention programmes utilising Nevirapine, despite a High Court decision that to deny the drug is a violation of the Constitution (Kahn, 2002). In addition, she has continued to resist the introduction of anti-retroviral medication into the South African public health sector (Hartley, 2003). Journalist Kerry Cullinan sums up the government's approach as follows: 'Confusion is the only certain ingredient in [the South African] government's approach to HIV/AIDS. At times it feels as though there is a dance, but the tune is only audible to the Health Minister and the President. ... And the dance twirls on from one public relations blunder to the next' (Cullinan, 2003: 1).

The South African government's controversial response to HIV/AIDS has been documented extensively in both the national and international press (Galloway, 2001; Masland & King, 2000; Schoofs, 1999). Arguably, it is the international press which has been particularly scathing. For example, New York's *Newsday* said of the South African president that 'A certain open-mindedness is fine. But a person can be so open-minded that his brains fall out' (*Newsday*, June 2000, cited in Cullinan, 2001: 37). A perception of undue criticism in the South African media nonetheless led the minister in the presidency, Essop Pahad, to declare in 2002 that there was a 'media vendetta' against Mbeki (Cullinan, 2001: 37). Yet, by far the majority of news articles reporting on the 'HIV causes AIDS' issue at the time of Mbeki's public utterances presented both the orthodox and dissident points of view in equal measure and left it to their readership, largely unable to understand the terms of debate, to decide on which stance to adopt (Galloway, 2001). Indeed, it has been argued that 'the so-called dissident view holds sway and the intellectual confusion – if it can be so graced – has seeped into public discourse' (James, 2003: 9).

The politicisation of HIV/AIDS in South Africa has been unprecedented and has shaped the media's response to the epidemic. The views of President Thabo Mbeki, in particular, were extensively covered in the media prior to this research. Media debate regarding Mbeki's views was therefore a key pivot and dominant theme of many of the interviews conducted for this research, and provided a natural vehicle for interviewees' exploration of the advocacy role of the media in relation to HIV/AIDS.

It remains to be pointed out that, while this research was conducted in 2001, the issue of the South African government's controversial handling of the HIV/AIDS epidemic remains as pertinent as ever. The government has continued to delay the disbursement of 41 million dollars (approximately R300 million) from the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, awarded a year before Director of

the Global Fund, Richard Feachem, said in a press conference that ‘these delays are not measured in inconvenience, they are measured in human lives’ (James, 2003: 9). While most other Southern African countries have commenced treatment programmes, anti-retroviral treatment is still unavailable in South African public hospitals and clinics (TAC Newsletter, 2003). Likewise, the question of media coverage and debate regarding an appropriate advocacy role on the part of the media regarding HIV/AIDS remains as relevant as ever.

Findings

The Advocacy Role of the Media vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS Reporting

Two issues emerged when media practitioners were asked to comment directly on the advocacy role of the South African media regarding HIV/AIDS. These were:

- The extent to which the role of the media is to maintain neutrality and ‘cover the story’ rather than advocate a point of view and ‘impact on events’ ;
- The extent to which the media should view itself as a social change agent rather than a commercial, moneymaking concern.

Covering the Story or Impacting on Events

Most informants agreed in principal that the media should play an advocacy role vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS by impacting constructively on actions and events. It was argued that the media has a moral responsibility to inform the public about AIDS, to be critical of government policy when appropriate and to advocate constructive approaches to dealing with the epidemic:

‘I think that newspapers are one of the most important tools that we as a people, as a nation, as a human race, have. ... For those of us who have an opportunity to do something and don’t, I think that should be considered a crime against humanity. For having a tool, a vehicle, and not using it’ E1.

However, a few informants were dismissive of the notion of an advocacy role for the media in the first instance. This was on the grounds that journalism is solely concerned with ‘covering the story’ rather than ‘impacting’ upon history or the unfolding of events. It was argued that it is inappropriate to ascribe an advocacy agenda to newspaper coverage of HIV/AIDS on the logic that the role of media practitioners is to tell a story ‘as it plays out’ and not to change the course of events:

‘I’m interested in it [AIDS] as it plays out. Because there is a story to tell and a story to cover. ... It’s like what someone said he would tell his daughter about what he did during the dotcom revolution and he said “I’m going to tell her that I covered it for the Wall Street Journal” ’ E6.

In the quotation above, the editor of one of the most influential dailies in South Africa compares the coverage of HIV/AIDS in South Africa to coverage of the dotcom revolution in America. He expresses the view that the contribution of the media to social change is inherently limited to neutral coverage, regardless of the issue at stake

The advocacy role of the media was not necessarily seen by interviewees to contradict the media’s responsibility to remain neutral and objective. There was a general tendency on the part of media practitioners to differentiate between a subjective advocacy role (in the form of editorial and comment) and news reporting *per se*. It was argued that news reporting must remain as neutral as possible, despite any personal feelings or opinions journalists may hold. The following quotation exemplifies this point of view:

‘If it’s news, it’ll end up in the paper. ... If my work was that partisan, I wouldn’t have the good relationships that I have with all role-players’ J2.

This quotation would seem to imply that news values and neutrality, rather than advocacy agendas, should determine news coverage. By implication, a good journalist is someone who puts his or her personal views and agendas aside, talks to all role-players and represents them from their own point of view.

Some interviewees argued, however, that there is no clear line to be drawn between advocacy journalism and news reporting in general. They argued that objectivity and neutrality in news reporting are impossible, and that personal perspectives will always determine which events and actions are highlighted,

and how they are portrayed. From this perspective, advocacy is not a value. It is simply, for better or worse, inherent to media coverage:

‘I don’t actually agree with this thing about objective journalism. I think that’s an American construct that is totally false. ... Being objective is something taught in journalism classes and it doesn’t have any bearing on reality’ J3.

As mentioned previously, the media debate around the views of President Mbeki, regarding poverty rather than HIV as the cause of AIDS, provided a natural vehicle for interviewees’ exploration of the role of the media in relation to HIV/AIDS. In this regard, it was argued that the quest for balanced representation is misguided, in that it implies that coverage should be given to points of view which lack credibility. Thus, in the following quotation, it is argued that to give equal weight to both orthodox and dissident views regarding the aetiology of AIDS lends credence to views that are wrong or, indeed, crazy:

‘I think it’s hypocritical to say – and I’m thinking of the AIDS dissident argument here – that we have to give both sides of the story when one side is being presented by a lunatic’ J5.

The Media as Commercial Concern or Social Change Agent

Clearly, the news media are commercial concerns that are driven by profitability. The news value of HIV/AIDS stories (the extent to which they sell papers) determines their coverage to a certain degree:

‘The editor said, ”it [the story] wouldn’t have sold the paper”. So, I mean, that is your bottom-line, and people are quite frank about that’ J10.

Yet, only one informant argued that the profit-motive precludes newspapers from fulfilling an advocacy role. This was on the grounds that, in order to sell its product, the media must *reflect* the views of its readers, rather than *create* them:

‘The idea that it is a moral imperative for a newspaper in the public domain to play an advocacy role is such dangerous territory. A paper’s moral imperative is to make money. That’s the reason it

exists. ... The media are riding the consensus, not creating it, because that's how they make money' J6.

For the rest, informants all believed that profitability concerns do not need, and should not be allowed, to shift the priority of the news media away from informing and educating the public. It was felt that the argument that newspapers must 'give the reader what they want to read' is a red herring:

'It means I'd have to print celebrity divorces, and soccer on the front page... No editor ever does that. We do give readers what we think they need, not only what they want' E3.

Many journalists were nonetheless critical of the extent to which profitability concerns have determined the nature and extent of HIV/AIDS media coverage. In the following quotation, the culpability of the news media in considering HIV/AIDS coverage predominantly from a news value perspective is compared to the culpability of drug companies protecting corporate profit at the expense of people's lives:

'The media sector is guilty of seeing it [HIV/AIDS] from a purely financial perspective, almost the same way as the drug companies are doing' J5.

In the section above, the terms of debate regarding the role of the media have been starkly drawn. In fact, informants tended to adopt a more strategic approach to the relative alignment of the media objectives of advocacy, on the one hand, and neutrality and profitability on the other. Media practitioners arranged and re-arranged the priority of these objectives inconsistently, in accordance with their interpretation of the specific issues at stake in any given instance. Likewise, it is important to point out that perceptions regarding the nature of the media's advocacy role vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS were not confined to interviewees' direct or explicit responses to questions in this regard. These perceptions were embedded in discussion of specific issues and emerged in a haphazard and often contradictory way across the entire body of interviews. In the following sections of this paper, an attempt will be made to reflect the complexity of these views.

Strong vs. Weak Advocacy: Agenda Setting or Information Provision

Informants tended to talk about advocacy in what can be called a ‘strong’ and a ‘weak’ sense. Advocacy in the strong sense includes a self-conscious recognition of the media’s power to influence public opinion and to promote or fast-track policy agendas. The following quotations from two journalists exemplify this understanding of the strong advocacy role of the media in different ways:

‘Without a doubt, government is sensitive to pressure. So it will respond. I mean, if something is in the press then action on that will be taken much quicker than anything else’ J1.

‘We have the biggest influence on society, what we say and do is heard and shapes the opinions of millions of readers. It is not the duty of the media to promote a specific philosophy, but AIDS is such a big problem, we need to revolutionise the way we think’ J5.

The advocacy role of the media is often, however, defined in a weaker (or more limited) way. This is in terms of a seemingly neutral educational role which is described as ‘reporting what is happening’ (i.e., information-giving), rather than as a direct attempt to influence public perception or the course of events (i.e., agenda-setting). The following quotation is an examples of advocacy understood in this weaker sense:

‘The media has a responsibility to discuss and inform people about [HIV/AIDS], the same way they have to inform people on racism or elections’ S6.

In the next quotation, which refers to the South African government’s ongoing procrastination in providing prophylactic treatment to pregnant mothers to prevent the mother-to-child transmission of HIV, it is argued that advocacy is unnecessary because the public health issues at stake are clear enough to ‘speak for themselves’:

‘Journalists have to report what is happening. And the issues speak for themselves. Journalists don’t need to advocate if there are pregnant women who can’t get access to drugs’ E2.

Many media sector informants therefore described the advocacy role of the news media as reporting that informs the public about what is and is not happening in relation to HIV/AIDS. Such education is itself seen to be a form of advocacy, in so far as it directly contributes to effective social mobilisation:

‘You can’t get citizens making informed contributions to public policy if they don’t know what’s going on ... or if they do participate, their participation is limited because they are not well-informed’ E1.

It is interesting to note that newspapers’ editors on the whole were noticeably circumspect with regard to defining the media’s advocacy role more strongly. Only one editor explicitly and directly referred to an advocacy role for his/her newspaper in terms of influencing government policy regarding HIV/AIDS:

‘We are unashamedly advocacy journalists. We take issue with something and we run with it. We’ve taken issue with AIDS policy and it’s going to be a long-term battle’ E3.

Given the size of the study sample, comparisons between stakeholder groups should be made with caution. It must nonetheless be noted that journalists were likely to explicitly adopt stronger advocacy positions than editors, and that stakeholders from the non-governmental (NGO) sector were, by far, the most likely to assert the need for a strong media advocacy agenda. Thus an NGO spokesperson argued that:

‘It’s not like they are there just to serve as information officers only. They must interrogate information, explain it and adopt particular positions... That’s the point of diversity, of democracy; that people can adopt different positions in relation to what they think is good and what they think is bad. As long as they are giving it fair coverage’ S6.

Again, it must be pointed out that NGO stakeholders, like media practitioners, were not naïve to the complexity of the media’s role, and tried to bridge what may be somewhat contradictory views regarding the nature of the media’s role and the extent to which this can or should include an advocacy agenda. Thus, during the course of the interview, the opinion expressed by the informant in the

quotation above was to some extent retracted and the imperative for journalistic objectivity reinvoked:

‘But they can’t be advocacy groups because they have to be critical of the whole process’ S6.

Clearly, the nature and extent of the advocacy role of the media is a murky and contested terrain. At first sight, such issues may seem academic to the reporter intent on getting a story out, but the extent to which both journalists and editors adopt strong or weak advocacy agendas in relation to HIV/AIDS in South Africa appears to be a vexed issue which is played out in the newsroom every day. Thus many journalists described ongoing conflicts with editors and other journalists regarding what constitutes an appropriate response to HIV/AIDS related issues. One journalist described having to remove a poster advertising the Treatment Action Campaign from her office wall as this was seen by her editor as ‘taking a position’, regardless of whether her news coverage was partisan or otherwise.

Reticence regarding the adoption of an explicit or strong advocacy role on the part of newspaper editors should perhaps be understood within the context of the sensitive, complex nature of the press’s evolving relationship with the post-apartheid government in South Africa. This will be explored further in the following sections.

The Impact of Political Allegiance in Defining Advocacy Roles

Those interviewees who were *explicitly critical* of the government’s approach tended to define the media’s advocacy role more strongly as an attempt to increase social mobilisation and to influence the nature of government policy regarding HIV/AIDS. Allegiance to the government’s HIV/AIDS policy was in fact paramount in determining informants’ perceptions regarding the extent and nature of the advocacy role of the media regarding HIV/AIDS. In the following quotation, which limits advocacy to its weaker definition, as an informative or educational role, a pro-government stance is nonetheless apparent in the emphasis placed the health department’s agenda:

‘The media’s role is to educate, to write stories that educate readers as to how they can prevent HIV/AIDS, tell about various AIDS campaigns throughout the country, especially the Department of Health’s’ E5.

The need to avoid the politicisation of HIV/AIDS is seen, in the next quotation, to require that HIV/AIDS coverage is limited to the provision of public health information for people with the disease:

‘We’re careful that we don’t find ourselves being used as a political tool because that happens pretty often. It becomes an anti-government and a racism thing. ... The plan is to look at providing information about what people can do, where to go if you have this problem... It’s the same with people with disabilities; we take the same approach with our new thrust on HIV/AIDS’ E1.

The above definitions of the advocacy role of the media vis-à-vis AIDS were provided by newspaper editors. They stress information-giving as opposed to agenda-setting and opinion-making, and can be contrasted with viewpoints emphasising the need to challenge government policy, such as those expressed below:

‘It’s quite obvious that government is completely out of step with reality so there’s a major [advocacy] role for the media to play’ E3.

‘HIV/AIDS is the new site of struggle. ... If your publication is on the side of the common man, there is pressure to be brought to bear’ E2.

As mentioned previously, only one newspaper editor initially chose to describe his/her newspaper’s role in terms of an advocacy agenda. What becomes clear from the quotations above is that, while most editors were initially circumspect in explicitly defining their newspapers as having a strong advocacy role up-front, they nonetheless do have clear agendas and allegiances in this regard and have adopted a supportive or critical stance towards government policy. It could be argued that this stance may depend as much on news values (and the assumed views of any given newspaper’s target readership) as on an advocacy agenda *per se*. What is interesting, nonetheless, is that the adoption of a *supportive* stance towards the government was not understood as the promotion of an advocacy agenda. By comparison, the adoption of a *critical* stance towards government’s current policy was understood in terms of having an ‘advocacy agenda’.

It is unlikely that editors and journalists are naïve to such subtleties. News editors are certainly cognisant that news coverage, and the absence thereof, is not neutral, and impacts upon the unfolding of public debate. The following quotations regarding coverage of President Mbeki's letter to the United States President and his apparent dissident stance reflect this understanding:

'When I saw Mbeki's letter, my first thought was, "Do I really have to publish this?" But you can't not publish it' E6.

'I have made it a point ... that we don't focus on the controversies around Mbeki because this is totally not the issue...' E1.

Despite initial glosses delimiting advocacy to information provision rather than agenda-setting, the extent and manner in which newspapers cover the government's response to the epidemic, and the impact which this has on both public opinion and government policy, was considered and reconsidered by almost all interviewees throughout the course of interviews.

AIDS, Apartheid and Advocacy Journalism

HIV/AIDS was compared to apartheid by numerous journalists pushing for a stronger advocacy agenda. This comparison, which arguably functions as a mobilising tool designed to generate an activist response to HIV/AIDS, was explored in some depth:

'Regarding policy, just as the media under apartheid should have had an advocacy role and it did sometimes, so to with AIDS. It needs to play a role as well' J3.

AIDS was compared to apartheid in the sense that newspapers have a moral commitment to cover and to develop advocacy agendas regarding human rights issues. However, it was also compared to apartheid in the sense that the media is being influenced towards self-censorship on the subject. It was therefore argued by some that AIDS is something which only some 'left-wing journalists' are aggressively covering:

'I covered the Soweto uprising and, as I became increasingly politicised, I increasingly became a problem journalist. What I was

writing was viewed with suspicion. The same thing is happening to me with AIDS' J2.

'Under apartheid, we knew that journalists who covered it were going to get zapped in one way or another ... it's the same with journalists who are pursuing the AIDS story aggressively. You are *persona non grata*' J7.

The advocacy role of the media clearly needs to be understood as determined or limited by vested corporate interests. Concerns regarding business profit and viability also entail maintaining and negotiating a constructive engagement with the post-apartheid government in South Africa.

'We could have covered more about apartheid and we could have more about AIDS but there's no such thing as an independent media. Some people will never trash Mbeki because of a government grant or the CEO of the company doesn't like it. These are big corporates; it would be naïve to think we have a voice of completely independent reason. That's giving the media a sanctity they just don't have' J6.

The Politicisation of HIV/AIDS: Impact on the Media's Advocacy Role

Many informants argued that it is the very prominence of 'political debate' around HIV/AIDS that has been a distinct weakness in South African press coverage of the epidemic. This point of view was shared by many media practitioners, regardless of their opinion of the government's approach:

'You had everything relating to Mbeki and how he was dealing with it instead of ordinary people and how they were dealing with it' S2.

'Our focus has been so much on the controversial issues that we've actually forgotten what this whole thing is about. ... And now that Mbeki is not saying anything, where are the news items [about HIV/AIDS] in the newspapers?' E1.

The terms of debate raised by President Mbeki are seen to have diverted the attention of the media away from what are arguably equally important, but less politically controversial, issues such as the socio-cultural factors driving the spread of the epidemic:

‘The media should assist to give a more holistic understanding of where it [HIV/AIDS] comes from, ... why it’s different and why so many people are infected’ J5.

Yet the president’s views of and the government’s response to HIV/AIDS are clearly of enormous national significance. The question that is raised is, therefore, *why* extensive media coverage in this regard should have provoked criticism from many of the informants in this study. Why was the fact that the media has played an active and vigorous advocacy role in this regard not recognised, and commended?

From the point of view of many interviewees in this study, the focus of the media on government policy has had unintended negative consequences. Perhaps one of the most unfortunate upshots of the politicisation of HIV/AIDS is that it has played into the racial polarisation of HIV/AIDS discourse:

‘It plays into stereotypes that populations have. It plays into white stereotypes that blacks shouldn’t be running this country. It plays into stereotypes about the way that black people look at the traditional white media; that they are constantly bashing the government. It does a lot of damage’ S6.

Post-apartheid politics in South Africa are still largely defined by racial allegiance. While this situation is changing, the African National Congress (ANC) government is still widely construed, first and foremost, as a ‘black’ government. By implication, criticism of the government by the largely white-owned media is often understood as criticism of a black government. Thus, although many opposition parties, both ‘black’ and ‘white’ have now challenged the ANC’s HIV/AIDS policy, the terms of the debate have remained dogged by racial affiliation, even within the media sector itself:

‘There is a schism between black and white reporters covering the disease. The media is not holier than thou’ J5.

Certainly, many (white) journalists feel compromised in their coverage of HIV/AIDS by the racial overtones of the debate.

‘I’ll be very sensitive to criticise government because I don’t want to be portrayed as some white anti-government anti-transformation blah, blah, blah. So I possibly censor myself more than I normally would’ J1.

On the other hand, those who support the government’s approach to HIV/AIDS argued that it is not resentment on the part of the (black) government but, rather, hostility on the part of (white) media ownership, which has biased media coverage regarding Mbeki’s views on the aetiology of AIDS:

‘The media deliberately misrepresenting the president is almost a crime’ J5.

While concerns regarding racial polarisation were foremost, dismay was also expressed that the politicisation of HIV/AIDS has meant that the views of individuals on the HIV/AIDS issue are seen through the lens of their political affiliations. In addition, it has meant that coverage of these views may be determined by political persuasion. In the following quotation, the views of Dr Costa Gazi, a public health servant at loggerheads with government over the lack of treatment access for people with HIV/AIDS in the public health sector, are considered controversial. This is not because he is white rather than black, but because he belongs to the Pan-African Congress rather than the African National Congress:

‘A lot of our ANC supporters feel that we give Costa Gazi too much space. But Costa Gazi talks sense. He deserves space. This is seen as [our newspaper] pushing a PAC [Pan African Congress] line which isn’t necessarily true. The man just happens to be sensible and in the PAC’ E3.

The media’s emphasis on the views of President Mbeki was also criticised, on the grounds that the media had exacerbated, and even ‘partly manufactured’, the debate on the causality of HIV/AIDS. As a government spokesperson put it:

‘I wonder if it was that significant in our public life and whether it would have affected policy and would have had a real detrimental

effect in any way or whether they (the media) were just barking at a shadow, and whether they didn't make that shadow become more real and I can't say... So I'm not sure but that is a question in my mind – whether that was partly manufactured' S5.

The notion that the media can 'manufacture' a crisis of such magnitude in the public sphere is an interesting and vexing one. Clearly, the making of news is a circular process. The media reports on conflicting views, but it may also reify these views and exacerbate conflict as a result. The need to play a strong 'watchdog' role may therefore influence the course of events.

While the media does affect public opinion in general and influence politicians in particular, most informants maintained that it is not the media in and of itself, but rather the media in relation to a complex set of social players and historical variables, which determines what issues gain currency as social policy priorities:

'Usually there has to be a ground swell in society. Usually there has to be a reality which the media reflects. Very occasionally, I think that the media makes the issue but usually the media is reflecting the reality of what is happening on the ground' S5 .

Arguably, it is not only the amount of coverage, but also the quality of emerging media discourse which needs to be considered. It is perhaps the terms of the AIDS dissident debate as it has been framed by the news media that could have been more constructive:

'You know, if you ask the minister of health or the president, 'Does HIV cause AIDS?' [that] they are going to fall over their tongues. So it's become a game. ... We've had very superficial reporting on it [government policy]' J7.

Perhaps one of the most difficult issues raised by the media's predominantly negative coverage of government policy regarding HIV/AIDS is that it has functioned to highlight and exacerbate increased opposition between government and civil society:

'I sometimes wonder whether it in a way harmed civil society-government cooperation in a way that didn't need to happen' S5.

Conflict in debate was seen to contribute to sowing social division, to mitigate against constructive action and to account for the lack of a unified response to HIV/AIDS across all sectors of society. This is seen particularly in the extent to which the politicisation and the racialisation of the HIV/AIDS debate have become conflated:

‘Unfortunately, AIDS is not like that disaster [the US September 11 attacks] which brought people together. Because AIDS has come on a racial basis. That attack struck right at the heart of America. AIDS hasn’t [brought people together] because it’s by and large a black disease’ J7.

While the politicisation of HIV/AIDS in South Africa has had unintended negative consequences, it may well have had unintended positive consequences as well. It has forced ordinary citizens to grapple with the complexity of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment issues, and it has contributed to opinion-makers from all sectors and communities across the board taking stands in this regard. It has forced the government into a position of genuine accountability regarding HIV/AIDS, an issue which most South Africans would arguably have chosen to ignore.

Controversy around the media’s role in amplifying the dissident debate highlights the difficulties inherent in the media’s HIV/AIDS advocacy role. As a government spokesperson acknowledged, however, these difficulties and tensions are not specific to HIV/AIDS:

‘Clearly, the media has a tradition of being on the side of the citizen as opposed to the state. That is in the tradition of journalism and I think we [the government] should accept that there is a legitimacy to that as well. ... We are answerable, we are accountable, we use your money’ S5.

The role of the press in a democracy may always be vexatious. But the fact that both the government and the media of South Africa are accountable in relation to the way the crisis of HIV/AIDS is dealt with is no longer contested. In fact, it could be argued that the controversy provoked by President Mbeki’s viewpoints has had unintended positive consequences, in so far as it has provoked enormous public interest and concern regarding HIV/AIDS. In the following quotation, it is argued that opposition to Mbeki’s stance on AIDS has alerted a disproportionately white newspaper readership to the urgent need to address the epidemic:

‘If you say white antipathy made us say Mbeki is a fool, then the result has been, ironically, for whites to take HIV seriously. I think in some way, perhaps, the position he [Mbeki] has taken on AIDS – and the outcry it has caused – might have done more to conscientise the kind of person who reads [our newspaper]. Had he just rattled on about what a serious thing HIV was, I don’t know’ J7.

The politicisation of HIV/AIDS in South African society highlights the difficulties inherent in the relationship between the media, civil society and a democratic government. In the sensitive post-apartheid climate, where a fledgling democracy is still struggling to assert itself, the media has inevitably struggled to balance the need to adopt both a supportive and critical stance towards government.

Conclusions

Multiple difficulties have been raised in this paper around the adoption of an explicit and well-developed HIV advocacy position by the South African print media. This should not be taken to suggest a lack of conviction regarding the potential role for social change which the news media can play regarding HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Rather, the detailed representation of media practitioners’ and other stakeholders’ views provided in this report will hopefully inform a deeper and more textured understanding of the issues at stake in facilitating an advocacy agenda within the context of HIV/AIDS news reporting in the South African print media. In this regard, two over-riding issues stand out for consideration. These are, firstly, the balancing of the conflicting journalistic imperatives of advocacy and neutrality, and secondly, the balancing of the imperatives of advocacy and commercial news value.

Advocacy and Neutrality

While, in principle, an advocacy role regarding HIV/AIDS was broadly accepted by most informants, the requirement of remaining neutral and objective was seen to delimit or constrain this role. As a result, the media’s advocacy role was defined in a variety of ways along a continuum of weaker and stronger advocacy agendas. In particular, there was no clear agreement on the part of study participants that proactive agenda setting for public health policy is a legitimate role of the news media. This will clearly need to be negotiated by all those interested in fast-tracking an advocacy response on the part of the South African

media. At the same time, it should be noted that interviewees from the media sector represented in this study were in fact far more open to the imperatives of an advocacy agenda than it may appear at first sight.

Inconsistent perceptions regarding the appropriate role of the media vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS brings numerous critical issues regarding the nature and extent of media advocacy to the fore. Balanced news coverage is still upheld as a goal to aspire to. It is, ultimately, differing views regarding where the truth lies that appears to define people's opinions regarding what constitutes 'objective' journalism and what does not. It would appear that most informants therefore construe 'advocacy' as a moral imperative to report the truth – and influence opinion accordingly – when the truth in question is oppositional to the views adopted by the powers that be.

Reticence regarding the adoption of a strong advocacy role regarding HIV/AIDS should be understood within the context of the media's evolving relationship with the post-apartheid government and its controversial approach to HIV/AIDS. Although a growing momentum towards HIV/AIDS advocacy journalism has developed, this is unfortunately seen by some informants to have been spearheaded by the white media and by vested political interests, and to have limited impact as a result.

The development of a strong and consistent advocacy response on the part of the South African media can usefully be compared and contrasted to the previous development of an advocacy agenda on the part of the media to apartheid, especially in so far as this comparison provides many role-players with an ethical justification for such an approach to HIV/AIDS.

South African press coverage of HIV/AIDS can be said to be distinguished by what Schneider (2001: 728) describes as its 'vigorous' coverage of the public disagreement between politicians and a range of non-governmental actors. The South African media has received substantial criticism for the extent to which it has played a role in demanding government accountability regarding HIV/AIDS. Whether the press should be criticised or commended in this regard depends largely on one's point of view regarding whose interests the media should represent. The findings of this study seem to suggest that the interests of the state and ruling political party are reflected in, but may not in fact dominate, the South African media, as suggested by Shepperson (2000) and Cullinan (2001).

South African newspapers which have facilitated investigative journalism in the area of HIV/AIDS policy have already played a critical role in exposing and

criticising public policy and have threatened the legitimacy of the government's response to HIV/AIDS. In this sense, proactive and investigative journalism means, as one editor put it, that newspapers can and do function, in their own right, as a public policy watchdog or, as one editor put it, as 'the flea on the Rotweiller' (E3). This may prove to distinguish the South African media from much other African media, which according to Gibson (1994) only acknowledged the AIDS epidemic after governments provided the lead.

It should be noted that advocacy journalism, and pro-active investigation and research in particular, need not and should not be limited to the interrogation of government policy. There are a range of other role-players – including the business, trade union and religious sectors, not to mention the media sector itself – whose roles and responsibilities concerning HIV/AIDS require media attention and interrogation.

Advocacy and News Values

Another challenge that frustrates media advocacy agendas regarding HIV/AIDS is the requirement to conform to news values, thereby ensuring the financial sustainability of the media. In this regard, the politicisation of HIV/AIDS has contributed substantially to its newsworthiness. But while political controversy has meant that AIDS has retained a constant presence in the media, other aspects of the disease, which are potentially equally controversial and by implication - newsworthy, are seldom addressed. In particular, some interviewees argued that the media urgently needs to report on the larger socio-economic forces and socio-cultural practices that drive the disease. This will require focused commitment and increasing initiative from a sector with ever-increasing resource constraints (Stein, 2002). The advocacy agenda of the media could therefore usefully be defined in terms of a proactive attempt to maintain and increase the news value of HIV/AIDS. As one journalist in this study put it, 'If readers are not interested in AIDS, we need to find ways to make them interested' (J2).

It remains to be pointed out that HIV/AIDS media advocacy initiatives cannot focus on media practitioners alone. Media advocacy is largely dependent upon the ability of interest groups to ensure that their voices are heard above the loudspeakers employed by those engaged in political debate. Those interested in improving media coverage on HIV/AIDS need to recognise that it is they themselves, and those they represent, who have the power to influence and develop an HIV/AIDS advocacy agenda for the media.

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