

**ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR HIV AND AIDS REPORTING:
THE INTEREST-GROUP FACTOR**

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2008 13: 75 - 92

Thalyta Swanepoel, Lynnette M. Fourie and Johannes D. Froneman*

ABSTRACT

HIV and Aids is a complex developmental issue. Cognisance should therefore be taken of the socio-cultural, socio-economic and epidemiological factors impacting on the syndrome. To deal with HIV and Aids in such a comprehensive manner, a multi-sectoral approach is required in which government, civil society, the media and NGOs take hands. In this regard criticism about media coverage on HIV and Aids has resulted in constructive suggestions, mainly from interest groups, through which they performed a potentially powerful agenda-setting function. This article extracts a number of guidelines from the suggestions to formulate an ethical framework for HIV and Aids reporting in view of the lack of guidelines in professional ethical codes (e.g. the Code of the Press Council of South Africa) as well as institutional codes (i.e. that of individual media institutions). The proposed interest group guidelines are directed at journalism practice, but also address ethical issues, e.g. that the media consider the rights of people with HIV and Aids, respect their right to confidentiality and portray them in a dignified manner.

* Thalyta Swanepoel, Dr Lynnette Fourie and Professor Johannes Froneman lecture in the School of Communication Studies at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus. This article is based on Ms Swanepoel's Master's dissertation which she completed under the supervision of Dr Fourie and Professor Froneman.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that HIV/Aids is more than a medical problem, but the full complexity of the issue within a developing society is less often stated. In recent literature arguments emerged that HIV and Aids should be viewed as a developmental matter and all factors influencing development should therefore be taken into account (cf. Swanepoel, Fourie & Steyn 2007; Tsafack Temah 2004: 3; Somavia 2004: V). Socio-cultural and epidemiological factors are generally present in a developed society. It is, however, the socio-economic factors such as income inequality, gender discrimination, low income levels, a mobile population, low education levels and in certain instances bad governance (the priority government gives HIV and Aids as a *health* issue) that are unique to developing regions. The complexity of the problem in these regions thus requires a unique solution.

In this regard a multi-sectoral approach where government, NGOs (non-governmental organisations), community-based organisations (CBOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs) and the corporate sector take hands in the fight against HIV and Aids has become popular (cf. Chen & Liao 2005; Gómez-Jáuregui 2004). Moreover, it is evident that the media play an important role in addressing problems relating to HIV and Aids. In this context the media have a distinct agenda-setting function (Panos Institute 2003:13). However, given the unique interrelated conditions that need to be taken into account when addressing (and thus also reporting on) HIV and Aids issues in a developing environment such as South Africa, it is not surprising that interest groups in the field often criticise the media.

There are a number of professional codes in South Africa to guide media professionals, including the Code of the Press Council of South Africa (voluntarily implemented by the print media industry, and generally referred to as the Press Code), the SAUJ code (applicable to members of the now defunct South African Union of Journalists) and the code of the Broadcast Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA, which is implemented in terms of the Broadcast Act). Institutional codes include those of the SABC, *The Star* and *Die Burger*.

With one exception, these codes make no specific reference to HIV and Aids reporting. This is an important gap, as HIV and Aids is a specialist field and one of the most complex journalistic challenges of our time – not only due to the level of scientific understanding and background knowledge it demands, but also due to a host of relevant ethical issues such as the conflict between the public interest and the rights of the individual (cf. Cullinan 2001; Delate 2003a: 9; Smith 2003).

In a multi-sectoral approach it could be useful for the media to turn to the other partners for guidelines. While civil society does not necessarily have the ability to formulate and implement policy in the long run, research (Seckinelgin 2004; 2005) has indicated it is best equipped to identify needs, HIV and Aids contexts and complexities at grassroots level. Government on the other hand, is focused on policy formation, making a partnership essential.

Against this background this article aims to identify guidelines enabling journalists to be more sensitive to the development context surrounding HIV and Aids reporting. This will be done by studying different critiques and comments from interest groups (both from government and civil society) regarding reporting within the field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study literature investigation and document analysis were predominantly used to analyse the critiques of different interest groups regarding HIV and Aids reporting.

The interest groups referred to include government departments such as the National Department of Health (DOH); activist groups such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Aids Consortium and the Aids Law Project (ALP) seated in the Wits Centre for Applied Legal Studies; NGOs including NAPWA (the National Association for People Living with Aids); and world bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the different agencies of the United Nations. Organisations that have been particularly active in promoting HIV and Aids reporting are the Centre for Aids Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE); the SAfAIDS Media Unit; and the Africa Women's Media Centre (AWMC).

In co-operation with the ALP, Journ-AIDS compiled ethical guidelines on HIV and Aids reporting for the South African media (Delate 2003a). These and other proposed interest group guidelines for acceptable ethical reporting on the epidemic mainly focus on the rights of people living with HIV and Aids (PWAs), the rights of infected and affected children, and the roles and responsibilities of media practitioners when covering the epidemic (CADRE 2004).

The critiques were categorised into four main categories:

- Category 1: Genres and sub-themes are points in question that the media write about including grassroots social issues and activities, critical and in-depth journalism, and positive and constructive coverage;
- Category 2: Presentation focuses on guidelines ruling how news on HIV and Aids should be presented;
- Category 3: Language, issues such as stigmatisation, discrimination and sensationalism; and
- Category 4: Accuracy. Guidelines on the use of sources, contextualisation, statistics and claims are analysed.

PROPOSED GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL HIV AND AIDS REPORTING

Genres and sub-themes

Many studies worldwide have analysed the content of news items on HIV and Aids and certain trends have emerged, including sensationalism, alarmism, inaccuracy, disinformation and blame (Parker & Kelly 2001: 2). Galloway (2001) concludes that

Ethical guidelines for HIV and Aids reporting: The interest-group factor

the lack of authoritative reporting on the epidemic can cause harm because many South Africans did not study science and biology at school. Furthermore, newspapers should spend more time planning sustainable HIV and Aids coverage rather than concentrating on event-driven news related to the epidemic.

Critical and in-depth journalism

Well-informed citizens need true facts, analysis and interpretation to be able to make informed decisions – “otherwise, they will be like the blind men who touched only one part of the elephant and falsely interpreted it as the whole” (Hiebert, Ungurait & Bohn 1991: 445; cf. Sheridan Burns 2002: 149).

Although there is a lot of criticism against interpretive journalism (Nel 1999: 284-285), it is important that the facts have meaning, which they will only have within the correct context – including the necessary (ethical) interpretation to clarify the facts. Well-informed, critical and ethical editorial comment on HIV and Aids is particularly important, if not to persuade, then to further the debate and keep it on the agenda (cf. Hiebert *et al.* 1991: 446; Leiter, Harriss & Johnson 2000: 393).

Parker and Kelly (2001: 3,6) found that although the media often focuses on issues related to HIV and Aids, analysis is sorely lacking, stories are not followed through or developed beyond the obvious. In this regard, we submit that very little analysis of the critical cost implications of mother to child transmission therapy could be found. Furthermore, little attention was paid to the prevention of further HIV infection and the care of mother and child (cf. Beamish 2002: ch-4696; Parker & Kelly 2001: 3,6).

Responsible journalism expects of its practitioners to be informed writers. An uninformed person cannot be critical. However, it would be unfair to expect of journalists other than regular HIV and Aids reporters to be fully informed about all aspects of the epidemic. What one *can* and *should* expect of any journalist, however, is to double-check facts and comments when he or she is working in an unfamiliar field; and within the usual time constraints gather as much background information as possible to enable him/her to finish the task at hand in an ethically acceptable manner.

News themes

Galloway (2001: 2) says the subject (HIV and Aids) offers many challenges for the science or health journalist who acts as mediator between the experts and the public who need to understand the information in order to change their lifestyle and protect them against infection. This holds that newspaper editors undertake to regularly allocate space to the subject – not only when hard news breaks, new statistics are made public or in lieu of World Aids Day on December 1.

Beamish (2002: cd-4690) describes the topic of HIV and Aids as “political, economic, social and cultural. It is local, national and global. It is about individuals, communities, regions, nations and the world.” If a journalist keeps this in mind, he/she will never want for ideas (Beamish 2002: ch-4696). HIV and Aids subjects include:

Ethical guidelines for HIV and Aids reporting: The interest-group factor

- Action, i.e. stories on counselling and care; politics and policy – rape, MTCT (mother to child transmission of HIV), issues in the workplace, awareness and prevention, risk, conflict and politics;
- Impact, i.e. statistics, economic impact, social issues such as poverty and HIV and Aids orphans, and legal issues;
- Research, scientific and social; and
- Treatment, i.e. new drugs, clinical trials, so-called “cures” and vaccines.

The most effective HIV and Aids journalism integrates three elements, namely the perspectives of PWAs (the human-interest element); the bigger cultural, economic and political context of the epidemic; and the science of HIV and Aids (Stein 2001: 7,11; cf. Delate 2003b, Parker & Kelly 2001: 3).

Finlay (2003) holds that conflict has shaped South Africans’ perception and understanding of HIV and Aids since the mid 1990s. In 1994, there was the furore about the government’s HIV and Aids plan; in 1996, the *Sarafina II* scandal emerged; in the late 1990s the focus shifted to activists’ plea for MTCT treatment; in 2000, President Thabo Mbeki and “his” dissidents held the media’s attention for months regarding their stance on the causal aspects of the syndrome. At the end of 2003, the pressure started building for the provision of antiretroviral treatment (ART) in the state sector. In 2004 the debate centred on the prevalence of HIV among economically active South Africans. News coverage again mainly focused on political issues, such as statements by the Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang at the XVth International Aids Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, in July 2004.

Towards the end of 2004 a donor blood debacle at the South African National Blood Service once again placed the spotlight on HIV and Aids (De Lange 2004). But at the time Mbeki refrained from referring to the syndrome at all, preferring to concentrate on racism issues following the SANBS’s decision to test the blood of black donors for HIV infection.

In 2005 the media concentrated on the corrupt relationship between Schabir Shaik and former deputy president Jacob Zuma (Basson 2005), leading up to the rape charge Zuma would face in March 2006 after an incident at his home in November 2005. His testimony in court that he had a shower after having had intercourse with an HIV positive woman (he knew of her status) again made headlines all over the country. The court proceedings stayed in the public eye for many months. Zuma’s shower became food for continuous ridicule.

At the XVIth International Aids Conference in Toronto, Canada, in 2006, the Health Minister emphasised nutrition and the use of traditional remedies as alternative therapies to antiretroviral treatment. Her references to lemons, beetroot, garlic and potatoes were ridiculed in the local press. These foodstuffs were prominently displayed at South Africa’s exhibition stall in Toronto.

Thus, conflict, key personalities and the government's stance on the issue still influence news priorities when it comes to HIV and Aids – in line with traditional news themes (Finlay 2003), but at the expense of even more important issues, such as those in the social context (cf. De Wet 2004: 105, 110).

The media has also struggled to give the epidemic a “human face”. According to Beamish (2002: ch-4690) the *human-interest* element provides this “face”. People infected and affected with whom readers can relate, should illustrate the statistics, politics and economics of HIV and Aids. These include teachers, married couples, pioneers in the field of HIV and Aids, and Aids orphans. Key personalities are also included. After all, big names are news (Leiter *et al.* 2000: 34). However, people are getting tired of seeing the same faces repeatedly. Using the same faces too often could lead to people perceiving the epidemic as no wider than, for instance, young Nkosi Johnson (who died on 1 June 2001 of an Aids related disease), former president Nelson Mandela, the activist Zackie Achmat and Judge Edwin Cameron.

The South African media focuses on government policy rather than showing readers that one can live productively with HIV and Aids; women are portrayed as victims or as the responsible party in the spread of the epidemic (Qakisa 2003: 46). In developing countries, information on the illness should be comprehensive, including issues such as health care, housing, treatment for drug abuse, education and training, and legal services (Qakisa 2003: 61).

The Nelson Mandela/HSRC Study (2002: 102) recommends that the news media pay more attention to topics of research, myths and misconceptions, and strengthen the relationships with service organisations on grassroots level. The media should also take steps to offer basic information according to the needs of the specific audience.

Positive and constructive reporting

The message of hope is sorely lacking in HIV and Aids reporting. But how, especially in the light that the media is punch-drunk to the point that several editors of financial publications have in recent years barred any reporting on the epidemic without clear economic reference, according to the journalist and Aids activist Charlene Smith (2003). She says there is still too much focus on HIV and Aids as a “disaster”. Although the media cannot ignore the negative aspects, these should be balanced by also focusing on the fact that many people carry on with their lives despite HIV and Aids.

Presentation

The way the media presents the news package does not happen by chance. It requires thorough planning and careful selection of news and graphic material. The way HIV and Aids and in particular PWAs are portrayed in the media is a strong point of criticism. This dimension of ethical HIV and Aids journalism can therefore be addressed with reference to news frames, prominence, stereotyping and sensationalism.

News frames

Through the information it provides and omits, and the news angle chosen, the media promotes a specific reality (Tuchman 1978: ix, 1-12; Entman 1993: 54). Interest groups

are particularly sensitive about news coverage that portrays the epidemic as a disaster or as an image of war. However, the news frame that is created is often influenced by how interest groups themselves portray the epidemic (cf. Delate 2003b).

The frame within which news is presented, influences the way in which people will interpret, evaluate and remember an issue. With reference to HIV and Aids, this places a huge responsibility on the media. At the same time, it creates an opportunity for closer working relations in the fight against the syndrome as a huge social problem (Pickle, Crouse & Brown 2002: 441).

Prominence

The manner in which a news item is presented in a newspaper offers the reader an indication of how important the publication regards this item to be. In contrast to sensational reporting where the tendency is to present an item much more prominently than it deserves, many role players in the HIV and Aids field believe that news on the epidemic is often not used prominently enough. Readers quickly learn that an item with a bold heading at the top of a page is more important than one placed in a small corner at the bottom of the page (cf. Fourie 2001: 452-453).

Journalism ethics does not just apply to newspaper content, but also to presentation or layout (Garcia 1993: 36). Responsible journalism entails that info graphics are accurate and that care is taken when photographs and graphics are selected. It further holds that an item is not presented in a sensationalist way. Editors should keep in mind that graphics often speak louder than words. Photographs can either send a message that is in line with what the journalist meant to say, or the complete opposite (Woods 1999).

The manner in which PWAs are portrayed in photographs could perpetuate the myths that these people are thin and helpless, that Africa is a “sick, backwards and dying continent”, and add to stigmatisation and discrimination. In contrast, the positive portrayal of PWAs could create role models for other HIV positive individuals. This is a far more accurate portrayal of the reality of the world we live in (Delate 2003b: 3).

Smith (2003) calls the way the international media portrays HIV and Aids in Africa “Aids pornography”. They seek out so-called “stick people”, people who are clearly miserable and not coping. This is misleading, and adds to stereotyping.

Stereotyping and sensationalism

These issues are rife within the HIV and Aids sphere, i.e. that it is portrayed as a “black” or “gay” disease, and that all PWAs (especially Africans) are emaciated and helpless. Women are often stereotyped. For example, HIV and Aids discourses on women mainly focus on the normative understanding of sexuality: prostitutes are portrayed as “indiscriminate in their sexuality and dangerous and polluting to men” (Sacks 1996: 70).

To avoid perpetuating stereotypes, journalists should write about people to whom the audience can relate (Beamish 2002: ch-4693), i.e. a middle class married mom or community leader. However, responsible journalists should take care to protect the

privacy of PWAs, not to use sensitive and confidential information, and to avoid blame and stereotyping by portraying people in a sensitive way. Asking how a person was infected could create the impression that someone is to blame. It also shows that the journalist is biased and insensitive (Beamish 2002: ch-4693).

PWAs should not be depicted as irresponsible, because it is often not true. In reality, there are PWAs in all lifestyles and all professions. They live productive lives and can stay healthy for many years. Journalists should therefore also scrutinise their own feelings and biases on the subject (Retief 2001: 481; cf. Stally 2001).

Sensationalism can perpetuate stereotypes. Sensational publications concentrate on trivialities and present serious topics in a superficial, often frivolous manner. Journalists can also create sensationalism by exaggerating. This could lead to twisted facts, which has an influence on the credibility of the news item and the journalist. However, sensation is not necessarily created, nor is it always unethical. Sometimes the facts themselves are sensational because they are so out of the ordinary or shocking. HIV and Aids is a sensational subject, but publications should take care to report on the epidemic and related issues in an ethically accountable manner by being accurate, balanced and placing the facts in the correct context (cf. Froneman 2002: 103). Nel (1999: 285) says news should be presented in a “respectable manner that does not offend people’s sense of good taste”. Due to the explicit nature of HIV and Aids information, it can easily offend. Journalists should keep this in mind.

Language

The media influences the language of HIV and Aids (Beamish 2002: 4682). A media that is sensitive towards the environment it operates in, issues of gender and race, and social matters, should also be sensitive when it comes to language.

Interest groups feel that to implement guidelines that promote the ethical use of language (i.e. language that does not stigmatise, discriminate or sensationalise) could have a positive influence on the media. Woods (1999) argues that the content of a publication, the news sources chosen, and the news angles create a specific image of that publication. When news coverage portrays a community in its totality – including all races, classes, religious and gender groups, and people of all sexual and political orientations – there is a bigger chance that all groups will feel included and will respect the publication.

Good language is direct and strong. It avoids descriptions that one group/person can use against another, and also avoids hyperbole and euphemism. A journalist should further avoid words that have negative emotional value (cf. Rossouw 2003: 18). In the HIV and Aids context these include “suffering”, “sufferer”, “carrier”, “war”, “scourge”, “plague”, “victim”, “shame”, “blame”, “curse” and “punishment” (Stally 2001). To write that someone “allegedly” has HIV and Aids or that someone “admitted” to being infected perpetuates stigmatisation (Soul City 2001).

Good language is also accurate. In the context of HIV and Aids, the words a journalist chooses could very well distort the facts. For example, one cannot die of Aids. Aids is a syndrome – a group of illnesses – due to diminished immunity. Aids is caused by the HI-virus, which exposes the body to opportunistic infections that take advantage of the weak immune system. One therefore cannot die because of HIV and Aids, but rather because of one or more of the opportunistic diseases (cf. Beamish 2002: ch-4694; Delate 2003a: 27).

Although interest groups have made solid suggestions regarding the use of language in HIV and Aids reporting, there are proposals that do not hold water in a journalistic context. Delate (2003b: 17) quotes a suggestion from a NAPWA official who has a problem with the word “Aids”. This person feels the word implies that PWAs are helpless and is therefore not acceptable. He suggests the use of “advanced HIV disease”. However, this would only cause more confusion as people generally have a problem distinguishing between HIV infection and the syndrome, Aids.

Likewise, the United Nations Development Programme prefers the description “men who have sex with men” (MSM) to “gays” or “homosexuals”, which are seen as Western terms (Delate 2003a: 18). This, however, could add to stereotyping and could describe men according to the manner in which they have sex rather than according to their gender orientation. In South Africa, most organisations use the term “same sex”. In the Afrikaans media the terms “gay” and “homoseksueel” are commonly used.

Stigma and discrimination

In South Africa, PWAs feel judged and discriminated against (Fourie 2001: 498). They are stigmatised because others think they will infect them, and that they “deserve” HIV and Aids because of their own promiscuity. This perception is perpetuated by the media due to the emphasis placed on promiscuity as a cause of the epidemic. In South Africa, HIV and Aids is further portrayed as a “black disease” or a disease that only affects white homosexual men. Soul City (2001: 27) argues that the stereotypes more often perpetuate because of the images used in the media and the profile of PWAs who are willing to talk openly about their status.

Smith (2003) alleges that mainly service providers cause stigma. Interest groups create stigma, e.g. by focusing on the pitfalls of being open about your status or an incident such as rape, instead of focusing on the benefits.

Beamish (2002: ch-4694) highlights that language should be appropriate for the audience in question. The use of language should not only be an issue of whether one should use a local dialect, but also about the actual words you choose to describe a concept. To be able to choose the most appropriate language, a journalist should understand his/her audience and should have extensive knowledge about HIV and Aids terminology. The syndrome has a highly technical vocabulary which should be “translated” accurately. Proper HIV and Aids reporting also uses neutral, gender sensitive language.

Sensationalism

Because HIV and Aids is about sex and death, the media are often tempted to sensationalise (Soul City 2001: 21; cf. Delate 2003a), creating the perception that death is unavoidable. Consequently, little attention is paid to PWAs. Sensationalism further holds that people are portrayed as “good” or “bad”, is aided by emotions, and offers a very superficial view on real points in question (Soul City 2001: 21).

Sensation does not analyse, nor does it evaluate or inform readers. To accurately and ethically report on the issue, a journalist should understand the essence of the problem. He/she should also keep in mind that HIV and Aids and its contexts are not entertainment (Beamish 2002: cd-4696). Equally, interest groups should not use sensation to “sell” their stories. In this regard, Delate (2003b) refers to a press release sent out by die World Food Programme using the words “vanishing population of Africa”.

Media reports on the death of Nkosi Johnson on 1 June 2001 were mainly sensational (Cullinan 2001). For six months prior to the young activist’s death, the media predicted that he could die “at any moment”. Local and international media literally lived on the doorstep of his adoptive mother’s home in Melville, Johannesburg. Politicians used the “opportunity” to get favourable publicity. The media described the boy’s physical and emotional state in detail to pad stories with no substance (cf. Jara 2001; Pan African News Agency 2001; Sapa 2001).

One has to accept that the facts of HIV and Aids are already sensational. However, the media should take care not to *create* (further) sensation using inappropriate language, flashy headlines and insensitive graphic material as it could cause false hope, or perpetuate stigma and discrimination (Delate 2003a).

The final decision about language lies with the sub-editors, not the journalists. This group, however, is never targeted in relation to training on HIV and Aids reporting, according to Delate (2003a). It certainly is a serious deficiency.

Accuracy

The final category addressed here is accuracy, a basic element of news reporting included in most international and local journalistic codes of ethics (Retief 2002: 238-240).

As a matter of course, accurate reporting is thorough and precise, but the term also relates to credibility. Although accuracy *implies* that all facts, names, quotes, statistics, dates and places are correct, errors often occur. In the process the journalist’s credibility and the media’s reputation are affected, and the value of the story diminishes. Accuracy also implies the correct and careful use of words to avoid putting words into someone’s mouth – a common problem in Africa according to Nel (1999: 281-282). One could at this point add that an inaccurate journalist also does not care about context, balance, appropriate sources or sensitive writing. Therefore, these aspects should resort under the definition of accuracy (cf. Froneman & De Beer 1998: 308-309.)

For the purpose of this article, the term accuracy therefore implies not only factual accuracy and acceptable language usage, but also fairness, balance, truth, context, comprehensiveness and focus.

Factual accuracy

To say that someone has Aids when he/she is in fact HIV positive, adds to stigmatisation. Sceptics may very well argue that to say someone is tested for HIV and not for Aids, is a matter of splitting hairs. However, it is not scientifically correct and such a report would be inaccurate. In addition, knowledge about HIV and Aids multiplies continuously as scientists discover new facts. A journalist should therefore make sure she/he stays abreast of developments to ensure accurate reporting (Soul City 2001: 20).

To omit vital information is also inaccurate. Very seldom does one find a media report on ART that clearly states that not all South Africans who are HIV positive need ART, only those who have Aids. This has a marked impact on the issue whether the country can afford ART, and should be brought to a reader's attention.

Readability and clarity

One of the biggest challenges of HIV and Aids reporting is to report the technical terminology, medical jargon, scientific concepts and research findings in a clear, understandable and concise manner. Unfortunately many journalists are not precise enough to recognise the delicate shades of difference in semantics (cf. Mencher 1997: 159-162). On the other hand, well-grounded HIV and Aids journalists should guard against losing the ability to report clearly and understandably due to their superior knowledge.

Focus and context

The best stories are those with a clear focus. Reports on HIV and Aids could become long and complex, therefore journalists should guard against including too much information in a single story. Good journalism further relies on contextualisation (perspective and background) (cf. Nel 1999: 281-282), which is related to focus.

News sources

It is often said that a journalist is as good as his/her sources. This is particularly relevant in the context of HIV and Aids where a lot of unsubstantiated information is circulated. A journalist should not solely rely on expert sources relevant to his/her field of reporting. It is necessary to include the opinion of several sources to ensure balanced and fair reporting. At the same time new insights generate new ideas (cf. Greer 1999: 50). A regular HIV and Aids reporter quickly builds up a comprehensive list of trustworthy, expert sources. The problem lies with journalists who do not report on the subject regularly. To play it safe, the same sources are quoted repeatedly.

Shepperson (2000: 12) found that most news items were the result of press releases or press conferences, press statements by individuals or copy distributed by news agencies. More distressing is that journalists apparently do not take the trouble to

develop a solid list of credible sources (Parker & Kelly 2001: 2, 6). Furthermore, although women are a particularly vulnerable group in the context of the HIV and Aids epidemic, they are not seen as important news sources. The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) found that only 17% of all news sources in the region are women (IRIN News 2003).

There is definitely no shortage of appropriate HIV and Aids sources. However, as Beamish (2002: cd-4695) rightly remarks, it is not always easy to find them. Potential sources, in particular PWAs who add the human interest element to HIV and Aids reporting and give the epidemic a face, might be scared to talk to the media, especially in an environment where stigma, fear of rejection and violence still prevail (Delate 2003a: 2; cf. Anon 2005). On the other hand, the media in South Africa largely ignores the opinion of PWAs (Cullinan 2003). Stally (2001) suggests that journalists form relationships with organisations such as NAPWA to ensure access to the latest HIV and Aids information as well as access to PWAs as news sources.

Another source of concern related to news sources is that journalists who do not regularly report on the epidemic, often too easily accept someone as an expert without questioning their authority and level of knowledge in the field (Smith 2003). Journalists' best sources are those who have proved their knowledge and skills as accurate observers and interpreters (Mencher 1997: 306-307).

Balance

The traditional way to ensure balanced reporting is to convey all perspectives on the issue. However, two sides of an argument do not always carry equal weight and news coverage should reflect this. To present two perspectives as equally important when in fact one deserves far less attention, is misleading and inaccurate (Beamish 2002: ch-4684).

Beamish (2002: ch-4684) argues that a journalist can maintain balance and "objectivity" by staying neutral. However, "objective" journalism is not possible and journalism can never be a neutral activity. On the other hand, HIV and Aids is a subject that can tempt a journalist to become an advocate for the cause. Journalists should be aware of this danger, because it could cloud their judgement. This is exactly the problem critics of advocacy journalism have with this particular style of reporting where balance and fairness do not always come into play. Advocacy journalism is not widely practised in South Africa, and while some interest groups encourage the media to play a bigger advocacy role, others are vehemently against the notion (cf. Stally 2001; Beamish 2002: cd-4684).

Howa's (s.a.) approach is most acceptable in this regard. She holds that it is more appropriate to recognise that "a diversity of viewpoints exists; that there are solutions along with problems; that there is good with the bad. We should worry less about balance and more about reflecting a sense of fairness and wholeness."

Truth, fairness and completeness

To seek the truth and report on it as accurately and as fairly as possible is, according to Claassen (2004), the single most important function of a journalist. Nevertheless, to identify the truth – or the “provable truth” (Hausman 1990:29) – is a problem in journalism. News sources with a vested interest might be less likely to tell the whole truth (Hausman 1990:32). That is why it is so important that journalists seek out appropriate, knowledgeable sources as far as possible, and verify information. This is particularly important when reporting on claims about “cures” or treatment for HIV and Aids.

Fairness in journalism is closely related to balance. “Maximum truth, minimum harm” is a principle Retief (2002: 84) holds as the most basic ethical consideration in journalism. Fairness also comes into play when choosing words through which to portray reality – within the proper context.

Completeness relates to *which* information is included in a news report, and not to *how much* information is used (Leiter *et al.* 2000: 159). This raises a few difficult questions. When does a journalist know that he/she has gathered enough information and at which point can a journalist honestly say he/she has covered an issue properly?

Statistics and claims

There are recurrent examples of inaccuracy and the perpetuated use of incorrect data, and the incorrect interpretation of data in HIV and Aids reporting (Parker & Kelly 2001: 6-7). It is clear that the media in general lacks proper understanding of research matters. Furthermore the media is inclined to present careful deductions as fact, thereby creating a wrong impression. Journalists should portray the experimental nature of research findings and refrain from presenting it as final proof (Beamish 2002: ch-4684). More importantly, journalists should make very sure that they understand statistics before they report on it. They should also confirm the validity of the data.

On the other hand, science is not always clear and the HIV and Aids epidemic is particularly difficult to measure (Schwartz & Murray 1996). Even the most authoritative predictions on the number of HIV and Aids cases and Aids deaths are merely guesswork. Where claims are concerned, interest groups suggest that journalists remain sceptic, especially where “cures”, clinical trials and vaccines are concerned (cf. Cohen 1997). Journalists should also distinguish between treatment for Aids and treatment of opportunistic infections, as inaccurate reporting in this regard can create false expectations (Soul City 2001: 23).

The media has to be open to criticism about inaccurate and sensational journalism. The eventual aim should be to uphold the rights of PWAs, and to respect their right to be portrayed accurately and with dignity. Several publications, i.e. *Sunday Times* and *Die Burger*, have accuracy tests to ascertain whether their reporting is accurate. This includes questions about whether the credibility of the facts and the sources were checked, and that the facts reflect the truth (cf. Claassen 2002). Journalists at *Sunday Times* also have to indicate whether the report could have any legal implications,

whether they can provide the documents in question and whether they have objections to their sources being contacted (*Sunday Times* 2004).

CONCLUSION

Retief (2002: 37-45) highlights several tangent points in the Press Code, the Code of the SAUJ, that of the BCCSA, and the codes of *The Star*, *Sowetan*, and *Sunday Times* – points that largely correspond with the suggested HIV and Aids reporting guidelines. These include accuracy in text and context; balanced, fair and unprejudiced reporting; the protection of news sources; and respect for the privacy of individuals. Other points are that conflict of interest and stereotyping should be avoided, and that journalists should report responsibly on issues such as violence, blasphemy and sex.

In summary, journalists should understand that HIV/Aids is a scientific, social, economic, health, education and labour issue, among others. This holds that they have knowledge *beyond* mere awareness about HIV/Aids. However, seeing that despite the general guidelines available in ethical codes the media in South Africa often still reports on HIV and Aids in an unacceptable manner, guidelines reiterating responsibilities *within the specific context* should be either included in professional codes or in institutional codes. The above-mentioned codes were thus supplemented with guidelines extracted from critiques and comments from interest groups concerned with the issues of HIV and Aids. It is further recommended that the following compilation of guidelines be published as a quick reference guide, not just in professional and institutional codes, but also in resources directed at journalists in the field:

- Avoid sensational reporting through language, content and presentation;
- Avoid stereotyping and discrimination;
- Use sensitive, non-discriminatory, simple and understandable language;
- Reporting should be accurate, i.e. fair, balanced, correct, true, in context, focused and comprehensive/complete;
- Use at least two trustworthy and credible sources, including PWAs;
- Practise critical and in-depth journalism;
- Use statistics with care and date data;
- Find fresh news angles, and also pay attention to social issues and activities at grassroots level;
- Be sceptical about claims, especially those involving a cure, clinical trials and HIV and Aids vaccines; and
- Also focus on positive and constructive news.

REFERENCES

- Anon. 2005. Fear of stigma prevents disclosure. *PlusNews*: 13 June. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.plusnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=38687> [Accessed on 18/11/2007].
- Basson, A. 2005. Eers ge-Shaik, toe nóg 'n skok. Jacob Zuma: Die val van 'n kroonprins. *Beeld*, 21 December: 4.
- Beamish, J. 2002. Reporting on HIV and Aids in Africa: A manual. Washington, DC: International Women's Media Foundation. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.awmc.com/pub/p-4289/e-4290/> [Accessed on 27/06/2003].
- CADRE. 2004. About us. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.CADRE.org.za> [Accessed on 09/09/2004].
- Chen, H-T. & Liao, Q. 2005. A pilot study of the NOG-based relational intervention model for HIV prevention among drug users in China. *Aids Education and Prevention* 17(6):503-514.
- Claassen, G. 2002. *Etiese kode en riglyne vir verslaggewers, fotograwe en grafiese kunstenaars van Die Burger*. Unpublished.
- Claassen, G. 2004. SA media nié bo kritiek verhewe. *Die Burger* 14 February: 19.
- Cohen, J. 1997. The media's love affair with Aids research: Hope vs. hype. *Science* 275(5298):298-299.
- Cullinan, K. 2001. The media and HIV and Aids: A blessing and a curse. *Aids Bulletin* (10)2. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.mrc.ac.za/aids/jul2001/contents.htm> [Accessed on 03/07/2003].
- Cullinan, K. 2003. *Behaving better: The media, stigma and discrimination*. Presentation delivered as part of the forum discussion Committing Journalism: The role of the media in HIV and Aids reporting of the centre for the study of Aids at the University of Pretoria on 28 November 2003. Pretoria. Notes in possession of the first author.
- De Lange, L. 2004. Mbeki fokus op rassisme, vermy vigs in bloed-herrie. *Beeld* 11 December: 2.
- Delate, R. 2003a. *Ethical guidelines in reporting on HIV and Aids for the South African media*. Johannesburg: CADRE. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.journ-aids.org/Guidelines%20Change.htm> [Accessed on 24/01/2004].
- Delate, R. 2003b. *HIV/Aids and the media: A discussion paper*. Johannesburg : Centre for Aids Development, Research and Evaluation.
- De Wet, G. 2004. Agenda setting and HIV/Aids news sources, implications for journalism education: An exploratory study. *Equid Novi* 25(1): 94-114.
- Entman, R. 1993. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51-58.

- Finlay, A. 2003. *Conflict and HIV and Aids in the South African press. A comparative study, March-May 2002 and March-May 2003*. Unpublished.
- Fourie, P.J. 2001. *Media studies. Volume one: Institutions, theories and issues*. Lansdowne: Juta.
- Froneman, J.D. 2002. *'n ABC en XYZ van joernalistiek*. (Second edition). Potchefstroom.
- Froneman, J.D. & De Beer, A.S. 1998. Media ethics: Thorny questions with diverse answers. In De Beer, A.S. (ed.) *Mass media towards the millennium. South African handbook of mass communication*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Galloway, M.R. 2001. *Telling the story of the century - how are journalists coping with reporting on HIV/Aids in South Africa?* Unpublished master's dissertation. University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch.
- Garcia, M. 1993. *Contemporary newspaper design*. (Third edition). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gómez-Jáuregui, J. 2004. The feasibility of government partnerships with NGOs in the reproductive health field in Mexico. *Reproduction health matters* 12(24): 42-55.
- Greer, G. 1999. *A new introduction to journalism*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Hausman, C. 1990. *The decision-making process in journalism*. Chicago, IL.: Nelson-Hall.
- Hiebert, R.E.; Ungurait, D.F. & Bohn, T.W. 1991. *Mass media VI. An introduction to modern communication*. New York: Longman.
- Howa, N. s.a. Six of the best. In *RJR 16. The transformation issue*. [Online]. Available at: [http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjr16/six of the best.php](http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjr16/six%20of%20the%20best.php) [Accessed on 15/09/2004].
- HSRC. 2002. *Nelson Mandela / HSRC study of HIV/Aids. South African national HIV prevalence, behavioural risks and mass media. Household survey*. Cape Town.
- IRIN News. 2003. *Southern Africa: New report shows women under-represented in media*. [Online]. Available at: [http://aidsradio.oneworld.net/index.php?fuseaction+cms.full Content&id=1694](http://aidsradio.oneworld.net/index.php?fuseaction+cms.full%20Content&id=1694) [Accessed on 27/06/2003].
- Jara, M.K. 2001. *Blade Nzimande to visit Nkosi Johnson step up the fight for affordable drugs: Pressurise the PMA*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.sacp.org.za/pr/2001/pr0109.html> [Accessed on 06/04/2004].
- Leiter, K., Harriss, J. & Johnson, S. 2000. *The complete reporter. Fundamentals of news gathering, writing, and editing*. (Seventh edition). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Mencher, M. 1997. *News reporting and writing*. (Seventh edition). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Nel, F. 1999. *Writing for the media in South Africa*. (Second edition). Cape Town: Oxford.
- Pan African News Agency. 2001. *Messages of support pour in for dying Aids activist*. [Online]. Available at: <http://new.hst.org.za/news/index.php/20010105/> [Accessed on 06/04/ 2004].
- Panos Institute. 2003. *Missing the message: 20 years of learning from HIV/Aids*. London: The Panos Institute.
- Parker, W. & Kelly, K. 2001. Writing the epidemic: The role of the South African media in shaping response to HIV/Aids. Paper presented at the conference "Aids in context" at the University of the Witwatersrand, April 2001. Johannesburg: Centre for Aids Development, Research and Evaluation.
- Pickle, K.; Crouse Quinn, S. & Brown, J.D. 2002. HIV and Aids coverage in black news articles, 1991 – 1996: Implications for health communication and health education. *Journal of Health Communication* 7: 427-444.
- Qakisa, M. 2003. Theories, models and strategies in developing an effective HIV and Aids campaign in South Africa. *Communicare* 22(2): 45-64.
- Retief, J. 2002. *Media ethics: An introduction to responsible journalism*. Cape Town: Oxford.
- Rossouw, D. 2003. *Intellectual tools: Skills for the human sciences*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Sacks, V. 1996. Women and Aids: An analysis of media misrepresentations. *Social Science and Medicine* 42(1): 59–73.
- SAPA. 2001. Dlamini's 'afraid to testify in court'. *Dispatch Online* 12 January. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.dispatch.co.za/2001/01/12/southafrica/DLAMINI.HTM> [Accessed on 05/04/2004].
- Schwartz, J. & Murray, D. 1996. Aids and the media. *Public interest* 125: 57-72.
- Seckinelgin, H. 2005. A global disease and its governance: HIV and Aids in Sub-Saharan Africa and the agency of NGOs. *Global Governance* 351-368.
- Seckinelgin, H. 2004. Who can help people with HIV and Aids in Africa? Governance of HIV and Aids and civil society. *Voluntas* 15(3): 287-304.
- Shepperson, A. 2000. *HIV and Aids reporting in South Africa: An analysis of the response of the press*. Beyond Awareness Campaign. Pretoria: Department of Health, South Africa.

- Sheridan Burns, L. 2002. *Understanding journalism*. London: Sage.
- Somavia. 2004. ILO: HIV/Aids and work: Global estimates, impact and responses. [Online]. Available at: http://www.ilocarib.org.tt/oldwww/infosources/hiv_aids/global_estimates_report/global_estimates.htm [Accessed on 26/11/2007].
- Smith, C. 2003. *No innocents – power, ploys and truth in the reporting of HIV and Aids*. Presentation as part of the forum discussion Committing Journalism: The role of the media in HIV and Aids reporting of the centre for the study of Aids at the University of Pretoria on 28 November 2003. Pretoria. Notes in possession of first author.
- SOUL CITY (Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication). 2001. *HIV and Aids: A resource for journalists*. [Online]. Available at: <http://soulcity.org.za> [Accessed on 26/11/2007].
- Stally, A. 2001. *Advocacy communication – The SAfAIDS experience*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.comminit.com/stnicroundtable/sld-3861.html> [Accessed on 12/01/2004].
- Stein, J. 2001. *HIV and Aids and the media. A literature review*. Johannesburg: CADRE.
- Sunday Times. 2004. *Sunday Times Accuracy Check*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.sanef.org.za/ethics_codes/sunday_times/277060.htm [Accessed on 02/08/2004].
- Swanepoel, T. 2005. *MIV/Vigs-beriggewing in die Sunday Times, Rapport en Sunday Sun: ? Etiese beoordeling*. Unpublished master's dissertation. North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, Potchefstroom.
- Swanepoel, T., Fourie, L.M. & Steyn, E.F. 2007. *Sensitising communication students at the North-West University in South Africa to HIV/Aids: An exploratory study aimed at curriculum development*. Paper presented at the World Journalism Education Congress, Singapore, 25-28 June 2007.
- Tsafack Temah, C. 2004. Gender and income inequalities and HIV/Aids pandemic. [Online]. Available at: http://www.iaen.org/files.cgi/14610_GenderIncomeInequalities.pdf?PHPSESSID=379bb.3096deff1b2318e422bdef47555. [Accessed on 06/11/2006].
- Tuchman, G. 1978. *Making news*. New York: The Free Press.
- Woods, K.M. 1999. Transmitting values: A guide to fairer journalism. Poynteronline. [Online]. Available at: http://www.poynter.org/content/content_print.asp?id=4610&custom [Accessed on 03/07/2003].