

Beyond the margins

Warren Parker analyses the role the media should play in relation to HIV/Aids and other sensitive social issues.

Speaking to anyone working in the field of HIV/AIDS about the media in relation to the epidemic, the response is generally one of dissatisfaction. Pressed for details, complaints centre around sensationalism, factual inaccuracies and biases in coverage. Journalists and editors are equally unclear about how to conceptualise media perspectives on the disease, wavering between the need to play an educational, social and/or political role, or more simply, to report about the epidemic “as it happens”, in much the same way as car accidents or crime or political posturing happens.

Analysis of HIV/AIDS in relation to the media provides opportunities to reflect on how social issues should be engaged by the media, and that such analyses may well have broader application.

There are three main areas in which HIV/AIDS should be engaged: firstly, at the level of media institutions as employers of a very diverse range of people; secondly, at the level of the media as a mechanism for disseminating information; and thirdly, of the media as a system that has the socio-political function of highlighting issues of social consequence, with a focus on issues of transparency and accountability in relation to other social institutions.

It is recognised that HIV/AIDS has an impact on economic life, and that the growing epidemic affects costs of doing business, with regard to productivity and changes in the consumer market. It has also been recognised that employers can mitigate the impacts of HIV/AIDS, from the point of view of both profit and humanitarian considerations, to diminish the impacts of the disease on their particular enterprise. Strategies include internal educational programmes; interventions supporting health directly or indirectly (for example condom distribution, membership of health schemes that incorporate HIV/AIDS components, support to employees who are HIV positive or ill), and the development of frameworks that include addressing policies, strategies and rights.

In general, most of the larger media institutions in this country have taken the necessary first steps in addressing the disease in the workplace, and many have implemented comprehensive strategies – although it is unclear whether benefits extend equally to all strata of employees. In the longer term, the disease continues to pose challenges in terms of provision of support in relation to life-extending anti-retroviral drugs, addressing illness and absenteeism or the needs of HIV-affected families of employees, and these challenges do need to be consciously addressed by media institutions.

One of the early measures of media response to the disease

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was to consider whether they were giving it sufficient and frequent attention. There is no doubt that there has been increasing focus over the past decade; and the current situation is that HIV/AIDS issues are raised daily in virtually every medium. Most newspapers carry one or more articles referencing the disease, radio and television news broadcasts have references at least on a weekly basis, and most magazines address the issue in one way or another. Over and above news, feature or documentary information, the disease is raised through educational programmes and drama series in broadcast media, educational supplements or referral information to telephone help lines and other services in print media. Community media have also included HIV/AIDS news and educational content.

Media institutions and organisations working in the HIV/AIDS sector have engaged in a number of formal partnerships. Soul City has linked themes from its television series to editorial content and the distribution of thematic HIV/AIDS supplements and booklets in print media. The Department of Health's Beyond Awareness Campaign promoted the work of community-based, non-governmental and governmental responses to HIV/AIDS through free provision of articles and photographs; Health-e has similarly provided radio and print material; ABC Ukwazi have provided material for the community radio sector; LoveLife has engaged in contractual relationships for production and dissemination of newspaper supplements and have also had other public-private partnership arrangements with the broader media sector. Training and support for HIV/AIDS reporting has been provided by the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ), Soul City, Health-e, and the Centre for AIDS Development Research and Evaluation's (CADRE's) Journ-AIDS project. The issue is also incorporated into tertiary level journalism programmes.

There have been a number of important shifts that have diminished the potential impacts the media might have on HIV/AIDS at a socio-political level. When contrasting reporting of HIV/AIDS with reporting on apartheid, there was a deeper level response in apartheid reporting, which included editorial commitment to pursue the issue, and the availability of budgets to do so. Responses were also framed by higher numbers of senior journalists in newsrooms, and photographers who were committed to visually portraying the diversity of impacts and responses. Apartheid media legislation also forced journalists to be acutely aware of the limits to reporting, and this went hand in hand with deeper political understanding and commitment. The alternative press of the late 1980s also provided benchmarks for how far one might go in reporting on apartheid – in spite of the legislative limits and related risks of arrest or banning.

In contrast, there is very little to be found of the day-to-day experience of HIV/AIDS in South African media reporting. While there has been some critical and analytic reporting in relation to government policy, the vast body of HIV/AIDS reporting has devolved to the running of single-sourced press releases churned out by the public relations arms of research institutes, international organisations, local HIV/AIDS campaigns and interest groups. Critical analysis, it appears, is understood only in terms of the notion of the media as a Fourth Estate – a system for fostering accountability in governmental matters – and there is little critical reflection on the broader sphere of HIV/AIDS intervention or response.

This is not to say that there should not be a critical approach to government policy, but it is surprising how little critical reflection is applied to other



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aspects of the epidemic. Millions of South Africans have died of AIDS, yet there is little understanding of the humanitarian dimensions of this to be found anywhere in media reporting. Equally, thousands of South Africans are part of small community-based and non-governmental organisations that have formed in response to the epidemic, and who labour with few resources and little recognition at the coalface of the disease. Instead, our understanding of response is centred on the activities of various international- and national-level organisations and government.

Why should this be so? Partly this has to do with shifts in the economic arrangements of media institutions, and stronger emphasis on bottom-line profits. Senior journalists have been phased out in favour of junior reporters, budgets and expertise are not readily available for in-depth and investigative reporting, a proactive stance towards addressing HIV/AIDS is mitigated by the ready availability of low-cost copy, press conferences and junkets offered by cash-flush elite organisations and government. The day-to-day complexity of living in communities severely impacted by the epidemic are far removed from the lived experiences of journalists, editors and corporate owners.

In becoming viable as business entities, media institutions have lost their edge in terms of social responsibility, and the latter concept has also been questionably expressed. For example, some newspaper groups, keenly endorsed the high-budget LoveLife campaign and contributed to the dissemination of the organisation's youth magazines *S'camto* and *ThethaNathi*, but caused concern when it was discovered that contractual arrangements attempted to ensure that there was no critical coverage of the LoveLife programme. One paper was also contractually obliged to discontinue its previous no-cost social responsibility practice of including the national tollfree AIDS helpline number alongside HIV/AIDS articles, in favour of LoveLife's youth focused helpline, ThethaJunction.

The LoveLife programme has been viewed

critically by various publications – such as *NoseWeek*, *Fair Lady*, *The Citizen*, *Business Day* and *ThisDay* – notably in relation to its high budgets, the claims to halving HIV prevalence and the resulting massive impacts on youth prevention, and the poor conceptualisation of its billboard campaigns.

International HIV/AIDS organisations including UNAIDS and the Global Business Coalition have keenly championed the idea of partnerships between the corporate and HIV/AIDS sectors, including media corporates. Doing so might well be an indication of commitment to addressing the epidemic, but it introduces potentials for bias and fosters an environment of limited critique. It would certainly raise questions if the media were to be partners of the government in response to HIV/AIDS by virtue of limiting accountability. It follows that such limitations should be considered in relation to any partnership between media institutions and other organisations working in the sector (unless the issues of potential bias are formally addressed within terms of reference).

Media focus and the fostering of critical debate has a strong influence on public policy. Championing the experiences of the marginalised, or proactively exploring marginalised aspects of the epidemic may well make important and tangible differences to people's lives. However, the South African media have struggled to feel their way into the margins. There are obvious tensions between approaches to journalism that emphasise proactive advocacy on social issues, versus reactive responses to news "as it happens".

There are obvious commercial benefits to uncritically running press release copies, juniorising newsrooms and relegating proactive involvement in HIV/AIDS to partnerships with HIV/AIDS organisations. This approach however appears to come at considerable cost – the cost of abrogating the media's role as key players in bringing to light the direct human consequences of HIV/AIDS, and of fostering a climate of critical, potentially transformative engagement in relation to HIV/AIDS.



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