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Journalists, ethics and HIV/AIDS

It is death rather than renaissance that draws the foreign press to Africa. But where are the ethics that protect HIV/AIDS sufferers from unscrupulous journalists?

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When her picture was published in a Sunday newspaper, the HIV positive woman was thrown out of her Durban home by her family. The photographer involved had promised that the photo would never be published in this country.

The European TV crew promised to give the Hlabisa family money for the children's education. In exchange, the family agreed to allow their pain at losing parents, children, breadwinners to be filmed. But once the poverty-stricken family's tears were captured on celluloid, the crew vanished and the family never heard from them again.

In Khutsong, Carletonville, sex workers spoke at length to a US journalist, telling him about how they enforced the use of condoms amongst their mineworker clients. They did not hide their identities as they were assured that the story would be published overseas. But a few months later, the women were devastated when the story appeared in the local press and they were revealed as prostitutes.

These are but a few of the many violations of HIV/AIDS sufferers' privacy committed in the name of freedom of the press. These are some of the stories that shame the journalism profession.

The poor, the sick and the dying of Africa have found that their suffering is newsworthy as journalists flock to the continent to document the spread of the modern Bubonic Plague. Forget renaissance. It is the deaths of Africans' that is big news.

In the process, nurses, doctors and the staff of HIV/AIDS organisations are unwittingly cast as gatekeepers, as they try to negotiate the conditions under which journalists can gain access to those who are sick, dying, caring for the dying or mourning dead relatives.

It's an awkward situation. In our media-driven world, images of death can drive western donors to open their wallets. Yet the NGOs and healthworkers have to deal with the devastation caused when the interactions with journalists go wrong – and they are often blamed when problems arise.

Liz Towell, manager of Sinosizo, a KwaZulu-Natal organisation involved in home-based care, says that some journalists "have no ethics at all".

“I’ve never seen anything like it. I had no idea people would tell you one thing and then do exactly the opposite to get their story. They have caused untold grief and damage to our patients,” says Towell, who has had to deal with the fallout after her patients’ HIV status has been exposed in the press without their consent.

In Carletonville, journalists who want to report on the Mothusimpilo project which involves sex workers in the fight against HIV/AIDS are now carefully. The project has even drawn up a code of conduct for journalists to sign after a few disastrous experiences.

It is not only members of the foreign press who are guilty. Many a time, urban, middle class journalists – often white – sweep into townships and villages to report on the heartbreak experienced by poverty-stricken black people affected by HIV/AIDS.

It is only in the past few months that the stories of white heterosexuals infected with HIV are making the news -- thus finally showing that the disease affects all South Africans and not just those who are poor, black or gay.

Time and time again, those who have no bargaining power but their HIV status ask the “gatekeepers”: “What is in it for me if I co-operate with journalists? How can they help me in my suffering?”

It is a painful and difficult question. There is such a tenuous link between journalism and financial aid; between disseminating information and awareness that will lead to people practising safe sex.

Journalists cannot, in truth, say that anything concrete will come from our stories. Anyone who promises that their stories will lead to a flood of funds is lying.

What is in it for journalists is crystal-clear: we are paid to write stories about HIV/AIDS, so we need those affected to open their hearts to us.

To salve our consciences, some journalists offer groceries or money in exchange for stories. While some may reject this “paying” for stories as an odious tabloid-press habit, at least it offers benefits to both sides. The journalist gets the story and the family can eat for another month.

But ultimately, the food-for-stories approach it is inadequate and superficial.

In Nigeria, journalists have set up an organisation called Journalists Against AIDS (JAAIDS) to educate communities and opinion makers about the human rights aspects of the epidemic. One of its methods involves bringing HIV positive people to talk to journalism students.

JAAIDS recently received a donation from the US Association of Alternative Newsweeklies' (AAN) at the behest of Mark Schoofs of The Village Voice, who won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting on AIDS in Africa.

Thus not all foreign journalists are unscrupulous “pain paparazzi”. Given the chance, ethical journalists the world over will respect host countries’ cultures and abide by their codes of ethics, if these are spelled out to them.

JAAIDS’s approach is helping to build a culture where HIV positive people are supported rather than shunned, thus making a more long-term contribution to fighting the epidemic.

Unfortunately, journalists’ organisations in South Africa have not yet taken shown a similar commitment to fighting the epidemic. Yet if we are to protect those South Africans most vulnerable to press exploitation, we need to stand together and develop the ethical codes that will guide our profession’s practices.