

ETHICALLY ACCOUNTABLE HIV/AIDS REPORTING: A case study of three South African newspapers

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Abstract

The media has an important role to play in providing information to form the perceptions of media users on HIV/Aids. Furthermore, the media has an agenda setting function through which it determines what news consumers think about, and how they think about these topics they are presented with.

Extensive media coverage has been given to the subject of HIV/Aids since the start of the pandemic. The nature of the coverage has, however, been widely criticised, mainly by interest groups actively involved in the fight against the disease. The criticism has resulted in constructive, although fragmented, guidelines on ethically acceptable and accountable HIV/Aids reporting.

These guidelines have been analysed and systematically summarised. This paper endeavours to evaluate HIV/Aids reporting in three South African Sunday newspapers against these interest group criteria to ascertain how it measures up.

1. Introduction

On 5 June 1981, the American Centers for Disease Control identified a new disease among five homosexual men. This disease would later become the most complex journalistic challenge of our time, due to the level of scientific understanding and background knowledge required of journalists.

In South Africa, a developing country where 5,3 million people are infected, the topic will remain on the media agenda in the foreseeable future. This is indeed due to the fact that apart from being a serious health problem, HIV/Aids is also a social problem, which adds to the complexity where reporting is concerned. After all, HIV/Aids is described as the greatest issue ever on development, health and moral level (vide KFF, 2004; James, 2001).

Taking this situation into account, the media (worldwide) have an extremely important role to play in providing information on HIV/Aids as this contributes to the forming of the perceptions of media users (Beamish, 2002; Cullinan, 2001; Shepperson, 2000). Extensive media coverage has been given to the subject of HIV/Aids since the start of the pandemic some 25 years ago, also in South Africa. However, the nature of the coverage has been widely criticised, mainly by pressure groups actively involved in the fight against the disease, such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Aids Consortium and the Aids Law Project (ALP); NAPWA (the National Association for People Living with Aids/HIV); and other role players such as the national department of health (DOH) (collectively called interest groups).

The criticism centres on issues not so much pertaining to the frequency of reporting, but the manner in which the topic is presented. Several studies have shown problems relevant to sensationalism, inaccuracies and alarmism (vide Parker & Kelly, 2001; Beamish, 2002; Gysae & Øverland, 2002). Aulora Stally, media manager at SAfAIDS, said in an interview with *The Monitor Online Edition* that the media in Southern Africa struggled to develop a positive attitude towards the epidemic since the onset. This kind of “doom and gloom” journalism created the perception that a life with HIV/Aids is

synonymous with death (Mukwita, 1999). This perpetuates the stigma surrounding the syndrome.

Criticism further centres on a lack of knowledge, also where ethical issues are concerned, deficiencies in the use of HIV/Aids language and critical and in-depth journalism, and a lack of attention to the social issues related to HIV/Aids. This criticism has resulted in constructive, though fragmented, suggestions from interest groups.

Although newspapers are not compelled to follow these guidelines, except in as far as they correlate with the Press Code enforced by the South African Press Ombudsman, a pertinent research question is: **To what extent do important South African newspapers comply with these diverse guidelines suggested by HIV/Aids interest groups?**

In view of this question, this paper endeavours to evaluate HIV/Aids reporting in three South African Sunday newspapers, namely the Sunday Times, Sunday Sun en Rapport, using the suggestions made by these interest groups regarding ethically acceptable reporting.

2. Theoretical background

In the dynamic, interactive agenda setting process, news content is influenced in various ways. The value an issue has on the media-agenda contributes to the public agenda. This in turn influences the issues policy makers consider (Dearing & Rogers, 1996:8) – which is highly relevant in the field of HIV/Aids where the main aim of scientists and activists alike is to turn the tide of the pandemic. Within this context it can be assumed that interest groups could also influence the media agenda (vide Dearing & Rogers, 1996:3), and therefore play a potentially important role in establishing the media agenda regarding HIV/Aids. Interest groups can especially contribute by establishing themselves as knowledgeable, credible sources of information. In addition, they could play an active role in educating journalists on HIV/Aids reporting and subsequently improving the quality of coverage in this field.

Despite the criticism on HIV/Aids reporting in South Africa, few formal guidelines exist to guide journalists, and subsequently influence the media agenda in this context. Many newspapers merely follow the general guidelines set by the South African media industry for ethical news reporting, such as the code of the Press Ombudsman (c.f. Knoesen, 2003; Retief, 2002; Seloane, 2003). Of the existing codes offering guidance regarding professional standards and general conduct, only one – that of the now inactive South African Union of Journalists - includes criteria on HIV/Aids reporting.

In this regard interest groups have also developed some guides regarding HIV/Aids reporting. Organisations that have been particularly active in promoting better HIV/Aids reporting are the Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE), the SAfAIDS Media Unit and the Africa Women's Media Centre (AWMC). CADRE, a local NGO working in the field of social research, programme development and communication in the HIV/Aids sphere, published comprehensive guidelines last year (c.f. Swanepoel, 2005).

A comprehensive literature study was conducted of the above-mentioned guidelines in order to analyse and summarise these interest group criteria for ethically acceptable news reporting on HIV/Aids. From the analysis four broad themes could be identified with concomitant ethical guidelines. They could be summarised as follows (vide Beamish, 2002; Cullinan, 2001; Delate, 2003a; Gysae & Øverland, 2002; Shepperson, 2000; Soul City, 2002):

Genres and sub themes:

- Practise critical and in-depth journalism.
- Find fresh news angles, and also pay attention to social issues and activities on grass roots level.
- Also focus on positive and constructive news.

Presentation:

- Avoid sensational reporting through content and presentation.
- Avoid stereotyping and discrimination.
- Use sensitive, non-discriminatory, simple and understandable language.

Language:

- Use sensitive, non-discriminatory, simple and understandable language.
- Avoid sensational reporting through language.

Accuracy:

- Reporting should be accurate, that is fair, balanced, correct, true, in context, focused and comprehensive/complete.
- Use at least two trustworthy and credible sources, including people living with HIV/Aids.
- Use statistics with care, and date data.
- Be sceptical about claims, especially those involving a cure, clinical trials and HIV/Aids vaccines.

These guidelines may not have been formally conceptualised as “ethical guidelines”, but clearly fit in within the broader discourse on ethical reporting. As such they could well be described as ethical guidelines, notwithstanding their lack of a formal ethical grounding. In so doing, we try and engage in ethical discourse at ground level, thereby avoiding the accusation that media ethics is sometimes conducted at a theoretical level without taking cognisance of real issues. In choosing this *modus operandi* in this particular research project, we certainly do not dispute the necessity of meta-theoretical endeavours in the field of media ethics.

3. Method

The content of news items on HIV/Aids in the period 1 January 2003 – 30 June 2003 was qualitatively analysed, using the synthesised criteria. This period was chosen because no event-driven media splurge took place, which enabled the researchers to study run-of-the-mill reporting. All news reports, in-depth news items, comment and columns making specific reference to HIV/Aids were included. In total 278 news items in 73 copies of the respective newspapers were analysed.

The newspapers in question are the *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Sun*, and *Rapport*. The *Sunday Times* is the newspaper with the biggest readership in South Africa. At the end of 2003, when the study was conducted, this English publication had 3,440 million

readers, mainly black, but also including a strong contingent of Indian, white and coloured readers. Mondli Makhanya (2005), editor, describes the paper as “quality populist”. The English *Sunday Sun* is the biggest tabloid (referring to format in this context, although it is a populist paper [Vink, 2005]) in the black market and also the fastest-growing Sunday newspaper (1,930 million readers at the end of 2003). *Rapport*, at the time the only Afrikaans Sunday paper in the country, in 2003 catered for 1,652 million mainly white, but also coloured readers. Tim du Plessis (2005), editor, describes the paper as a middle-of-the-road publication with a populist news touch and serious opinion content. Among them these newspapers represent the biggest contingent of the Sunday reader corps in South Africa.

To enhance the reliability of the conclusions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the editors of the newspapers to clarify some of the issues that arose during the analysis.

4. Discussion of results

The analysis indicated that journalists have only basic knowledge about HIV/Aids, and that they show little insight into the media’s potential impact on the public’s perception of the epidemic. Consequently, HIV/Aids reporting often only skims the surface (c.f. Swanepoel, 2005).

4.1 HIV/Aids and the news agenda

The frequency of news coverage is relevant, because it is related to how important the publications view the topic to be. If items on HIV/Aids are used more often, it could indicate that the issue is high on the news agenda. The prominence of the news items should, however, also be considered.

The researchers included items with HIV/Aids as secondary theme in the investigation, because it plays a role in agenda setting. By referring to HIV/Aids in reporting on other topics, the impression is created that the publications see the issue as a reality. The frequency figures are given in the following table:

Table 1:

| | Sunday Times | Rapport | Sunday Sun |
|----------------------------------|--------------|---------|------------|
| Number of items | 130 | 64 | 84 |
| Number of copies | 25 | 26 | 22 |
| Average number of items per copy | 5.2 | 2.46 | 3.81 |

From table 1 the conclusion can be drawn that HIV/Aids is higher on the agenda of the *Sunday Times* compared to the other two newspapers. This conclusion was confirmed during interviews with the newspaper editors. The *Sunday Times* plans to become more involved with the fight against HIV/Aids (c.f. Makhanya, 2005). Although the *Sunday Sun* views the issue as important, it is debatable whether more attention will be paid to it in the near future, due to its populist nature and factors such as staff shortages and a lack of skills (vide Vink, 2005).

Where *Rapport* is concerned, it is clear that HIV/Aids does not feature prominently on the news agenda. This is consistent with what Media Tenor found in a survey (Kok, 2003). According to Kok (2003) the Afrikaans media, such as *Rapport*, focus on HIV/Aids far less often than their English counterparts. In Afrikaans newspapers issues of culture received more attention (7,6%) than HIV/Aids (5.2%). Language related issues comprise 32,7% of the coverage on culture in the Afrikaans daily newspaper *Beeld*, and 42,2% in *Rapport*.

Rapport will probably only give more attention to HIV/Aids if more whites (the readers of the paper) become infected (c.f. Du Plessis, 2005).

Genres and sub themes:

- *Practise critical and in-depth journalism*

Each of the three papers paid attention to HIV/Aids in a variety of genres, but mainly in news reports. This is not extraordinary, because most issues in the news are introduced as news reports before it is exploited in genres such as editorial comment or in-depth articles. The emphasis interest groups place on critical and in-depth reporting is closely linked to the development of a topic in the in-depth news genre. Without background information and contextualisation, which is characteristic of in-depth reporting, a reader

could wrongly interpret information. The reader could be misled to think an issue is less important because it is not fully developed.

Few editorials or in-depth news items on the topic appeared, even in the *Sunday Times*, in which HIV/Aids reporting was most in line with what interest groups suggest. These genres give a clear indication of the news agenda, because topics are only fully developed in in-depth reporting and discussed in editorial comment if they are deemed important enough to take a stance on. By publishing little in-depth news about HIV/Aids and in the process give greater meaning to the topic, the publications create the impression that they ignore their responsibility to inform readers to the extent where they enable them to take important decisions.

The lack of editorials is consistent with *Rapport's* attitude towards the topic, but could contradict the stance of the *Sunday Times* that it sees the epidemic as very important. When the news coverage on the topic in this paper is viewed in general, this is clearly not true. Attention is given to the topic in other forms of editorial comment, such as cartoons and opinion pieces. These genres are also important in the context of agenda setting. Furthermore the *Sunday Times* creates the opportunity for parties involved with HIV/Aids to air their views, at the same time offering enough information to readers to form their own opinion. This is done by publishing articles written by role-players in the field.

The prominent focus on HIV/Aids in columns in the *Sunday Sun*, and the moral viewpoint of several columnists, creates the impression that the newspaper is a strong advocate for moral issues and that it has a well rooted sense of responsibility towards society. This impression, however, does not tie in with the nature of populist papers, which often operate within the Libertarian framework and rejects all kinds of restrictions (c.f. Siebert *et al.*, 1956:3; Skjerdal, 2001). In contrast the hedonistic approach is favoured within a populist context (c.f. Froneman & De Beer, 1998:295-296).

Where the *Sunday Sun* is concerned, all genres are dealt with superficially, even in columns and the single article published. The *Sunday Sun* creates the impression that trivial information on celebrities warrant attention within an HIV/Aids framework.

In comparison, items in the *Sunday Times* are mainly well exploited. The newspapers also use other methods, such as expert guest writers, to offer readers an even more complete picture of the issues. In *Rapport* the development of themes ranges from excellent to deficient, in line with the paper's attitude towards the subject. Consequently not all items are approached with the same journalistic vigour and accuracy.

- *Find fresh news angles, and also pay attention to social issues and activities on grass roots level*

The three newspapers covered a range of themes within the broad topic of HIV/Aids. Although the *Sunday Times* generally provided a balanced image of the epidemic and related issues, political conflict and issues of policy (as primary theme) received the most attention.

Most items in *Rapport* tackled the issue of treatment within the context of government policy. This means the publication gave precedence to the political side of HIV/Aids. Du Plessis (2005) confirmed this, also indicating that HIV/Aids politics is the only related topic that really interests him. In addition, publicity will be given to extraordinary events such as a breakthrough in research. HIV/Aids is thus viewed from a traditional news perspective, and fresh news angles are not explored, as suggested by the criteria.

The spread and risk of HIV infection got the most attention in the *Sunday Sun*, but the topic was mainly paid attention to within the context of celebrities or sensational events. It thus seems as if it is not the topic that interests the paper, but the accompanying sensation. This is in line with the populist nature of the paper. It pays attention to human interest, but this is also limited to the doings of well known figures and celebrities instead of being in line with the interest group suggestion that a "face" is given to the epidemic by writing about ordinary people. Another issue that receives attention in the *Sunday Sun* is claims and cures – again sensational themes. The paper's handling of the epidemic does not concur with the view of Mike Vink (2005), deputy editor, that he deems HIV/Aids in all forms as one of the most important news themes. It is, however, in line with the statement that health is a subject that is approached in a rather haphazard way.

Topics that receive little attention in all three papers include research, impact and counselling and care. Broadly speaking these are issues linked to the pure scientific (research) and social side of the epidemic (impact, counselling and care). The lack of reporting supports the criticism of interest groups and creates the impression that the publications do not notice the social side of the epidemic. This could be attributed to the fact that these themes often do not measure up to the traditional news criteria and is therefore not seen as newsworthy (c.f. Sheridan Burns, 2002:49-62; Hausman, 1990:13-15; Leiter *et al.*, 2000:30-44; Mencher, 1997:55-70; Nel, 1999:19-32.).

HIV/Aids is mainly a political issue in South Africa, and the ethical issues embedded in the topic, i.e. a prominent person's right to privacy, fades away when a newspaper for example has to decide whether to disclose his or her HIV-status (Delate, 2003b; Searle, 2001). HIV/Aids became an issue that tested the democratic nature of South African society: The epidemic and debate whether HIV causes Aids that raged early in 2000, raised several political questions especially about people's perceptions of democracy and the right to speak for and about others (Searle, 2001:78). There was a lot of media criticism against the new government's unwillingness to adhere to traditional scientific opinions about the epidemic, and the unwillingness to do something for South Africans already infected. HIV/Aids became a stick with which politicians and the public could hit the government. Galloway (2001:5) aptly describes HIV/Aids as a "political hot potato".

The debate about the causal link between HIV and Aids eventually led to the fact that the Durban Declaration, a document signed by thousands of national and international scientists showing their renewed commitment to the traditional scientific view, dominated 13th International HIV/Aids Conference in Durban in 2000. The causal debate however caused more problems because it succeeded in politicising the epidemic even further. HIV/Aids became a political puppet in the local elections at the end of 2000 and eventually caused hostility between the media and government. This made HIV/Aids reporting an even more difficult task. There was, however, one very positive consequence: the debacle encouraged the South African media to revisit the science of HIV/Aids (Cullinan, 2001).

On the other hand the politicised epidemic placed even more pressure on health reporters. What happens in the newsroom is that a political writer covers the main event.

Then the story is passed on to the health reporter who often has to do damage control. Our experience is that many political and other beat reporters, who are not knowledgeable about HIV/Aids, make mistakes, which the health reporters have to deal with. This includes clouding relationships with news sources in the field.

The political theme probably receives the most attention on the opinion pages of the three newspapers in question. Tim du Plessis (a former political writer), often takes politicians such as Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, South African Minister of Health, to book. The fact that the editor pays attention to these issues shows that the newspaper views HIV/Aids politics as important. It does, however, also raise the question whether it is the *politics* or the *issue of HIV/Aids* that interests the paper most. Du Plessis (2005) confirmed in an interview that it is indeed the political side of the epidemic that interests him most. He also pays attention to policy issues on a regular basis.

The fact that the *Sunday Sun* does not focus on the more serious political topics, is in line with its populist nature (vide Froneman, 2002:39-43). Vink (2005) attributes it to a lack of capacity and resources.

The lack of new news angles could also be ascribed to the limited varied of news sources used (see the paragraph on news sources.) All three papers could pay more attention to this aspect, although the deficiencies were especially noticeable in the *Sunday Sun* where the focus falls on celebrities. This kind of reporting does not measure up to the requirement of “boeiend aangebode nuus” (riveting news) Snyman (1990:66) sets within the framework of ethically acceptable journalism.

It seems as though the *Sunday Sun* prefers copy from other publications in the group (Media24) when more scientific themes are tackled. It could be attributed to a lack of human resources, an assumption which Vink (2005) confirmed in an interview. He said most of the information on the health page originated from Health24, an affiliated internet source, because the *Sunday Sun* does not have the capacity to handle the subject.

- *Also focus on positive and constructive news*

Where the relationship between negative, and positive and uplifting reporting about the epidemic is concerned, the publications generally speaking maintain a balance. Mainly

two news frames were created: a negative, “doom and gloom” frame, and a positive image of the syndrome as a controllable condition with which one can still live a long and productive life. In the *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Sun* a balance is struck between these two extremes.

In contrast, a negative news frame takes precedence in *Rapport*. This could be due to the emphasis on politics, conflict and policy issues, and could lead to an incomplete and distorted image of the epidemic in the minds of readers. *Rapport* will have to pay attention to the more negative stance it takes on HIV/Aids in order to adhere to the requirements interest groups set for ethically acceptable reporting on the topic. It would, however, be unfair to describe the HIV/Aids reporting in *Rapport* as unethical.

A continuous negative manner of presentation has ethical implications because it could isolate people with the disease and worsen stigmatisation.

Presentation:

- *Avoid sensational reporting through language, content and presentation*

Where prominence is concerned, HIV/Aids seldom reached the front pages during the investigation period. In the *Sunday Times* items on the topic were, however, used quite frequently on the first four news pages, which clearly places the issue high on the news agenda. In contrast, *Rapport* mostly used items on the epidemic further back in the paper, which indicates that the epidemic is not so high on the agenda. This is in line with Du Plessis’s statement (2005) that readers ought to take notice of the epidemic.

The *Sunday Times* and *Rapport* did not mislead their readers by affording undue prominence to items, or by creating sensation or using unnecessary graphic material. Indeed, very little graphic material accompanied news coverage on the epidemic. This fits within the framework of ethically acceptable reporting. The *Sunday Sun*, on the other hand, afforded more serious items very little space and used it towards the back of the paper, while news on well known people and celebrities, and more trivial detail were used very prominently and graphically on the more important news pages toward the front of the paper. Although it reiterates Vink’s (2005) opinion that the paper focuses on celebrities, it also establishes the impression that the paper does *create* sensation,

contrary to Vink's statement. The way the *Sunday Sun* handles the topic, is once again true to its populist nature, which does not agree with the guidelines formulated above.

- *Avoid stereotyping and discrimination*

Where stereotyping and sensationalism in presentation is concerned, the conclusion can be made that the *Sunday Times* and *Rapport* are mainly ethically responsible. Stereotyping in the use of language, on the other hand, is seen quite often. Good taste was employed widely, with the exception of the cartoon in the *Sunday Times* portraying people with HIV/Aids as Christ on the cross and Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, minister of health, as a Roman soldier withholding nourishment in the form of antiretroviral drugs. Another example of questionable taste includes a single incidence where explicit language was used in the *Sunday Sun*. The Zapiro cartoon offended especially Christian readers, as was evident from several letters the newspaper received. This kind of portrayal is insensitive within a Christian framework and links with the utilitarian approach that the cartoonist wanted to convey the message in a shocking manner in order to win support for the cause (c.f. Froneman & De Beer, 1998:295-296).

Language:

- *Use sensitive, non-discriminatory, simple and understandable language*

A journalist cannot be neutral. This is also true in the context of language. It would consequently be irresponsible to not make it clear to the reader, through the use of language, how serious the HIV/Aids situation in South Africa is. What is HIV/Aids other than a "dreaded disease"? Interest groups prefer that the epidemic not be described in this manner. We, however, feel that it is to some extent necessary to tell people how ravaging Aids is to make sure they do not become unconcerned, without falling into the trap of sensationalism. These messages should be balanced by the use of messages of hope.

The media have a clear agenda where language use is concerned. Through the language a publication uses, it creates a certain vocabulary. The agenda setting hypothesis comes into play here. When interest groups make suggestions about the use of HIV/Aids language (the latter was identified at the hand of a list compiled from interest group suggestions [c.f. Beamish, 2002:ch-4694; Delate 2003a:4-5, Delate 2003b:27]), they potentially have an influence on the media, and eventually on the way readers talk

about the epidemic. Examples include that journalists refrain from using terminology such as “prostitute”, “promiscuous”, and “innocent victim”, and rather use “sex workers”, “having multiple sex partners” and “person with HIV/Aids” respectively.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of the use of language in the three publications at issue is that generally speaking they all use acceptable, clearly understandable language. Terminology is mostly defined. (In this regard the work of Claire Keeton in the *Sunday Times* can be used as an example of good journalistic practice.) The few exceptions can be blamed on to ill-considered copy editing, and ignorance on the part of the writer and copy editor. It is our submission that this is mainly due to a lack of clear language guidelines. In addition, the publications are mostly sensitive when describing people or groups of people within the context of HIV/Aids.

- *Avoid sensational reporting through language, content and presentation*

The biggest point of criticism by far is the fact that all three papers concerned still focus on the “victim image” of people with HIV/Aids. This is mainly evident in the choice of words, i.e. “Aids sufferers”; “those suffering from HIV/Aids”, “people suffering from HIV”; “Aids victim at death’s door”, “African Aids sufferers”; and “babies and toddlers suffering from Aids”. People with HIV/Aids are also often portrayed as poor and black. This adds to stigmatisation and even negation of the epidemic. This image is perpetuated by the negative news frames that are created.

Journalists who do not use language that falls within what interest groups suggest, are notably those whose by-lines are not often seen in the context of HIV/Aids. They also make more mistakes than journalists who often cover the topic. One could deduct that these are other beat reporters who do not have well-grounded HIV/Aids knowledge, for example about factors such as the correct terminology. Likewise the impression is created that there is a lack of knowledge about HIV/Aids language in the copy editing office, because obvious problems are often not corrected there. This is a problem that should be addressed.

Accuracy:

- *Reporting should be accurate, that is fair, balanced, correct, true, in context, focused and complete*

In evaluating the factual accuracy of the reporting, we had to rely on our background knowledge and further judge according to the type of sources used. The analysis indicated that journalists at the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Sun* and *Rapport* are mostly well grounded in the basic journalistic principles, but make mistakes within the framework of HIV/Aids. There were many careless mistakes, for example where the spelling of names and the use of titles are concerned, but no grave concerns were identified in this regard.

It appears as if journalists, who do not write about HIV/Aids regularly, make the most mistakes. Journalists with little background on HIV/Aids have difficulty to contextualise properly, which results in shallow reporting. Furthermore, the impression was created that little trouble was taken to gain the background information necessary to write better quality reports. The conclusion is that ignorance causes the majority of problems in this regard. Journalists could thus benefit from using HIV/Aids resources (from e.g. interest groups) from time to time.

The HIV/Aids coverage in all three publications is comprehensive *within the narrower context of the specific news item*. The several examples of no or little comment we found, keeps pace with the finding of a lack of in-depth reporting. Completeness should, however, be viewed within the context of the agenda of the specific publication. *Rapport* mainly informs its readers about the current facts of a matter, because it does not want to force the topic on the public (vide Du Plessis, 2005). The *Sunday Times*, on the other hand, gives too much rather than too little information, which puts their readers in a position to take informed decisions. News coverage in the *Sunday Sun* remains shallow throughout. It is debatable whether this kind of journalism can broaden the horizons of the readers.

- *Use at least two trustworthy and credible sources, including people living with HIV/Aids*

The investigation showed that all three publications do use applicable news sources. What is clear, however, is that reporters mainly use the obvious sources. Few alternative perspectives are given. Many journalists, especially at *Rapport* and the *Sunday Sun*, seemingly do not nurture new news sources. It appears as if journalists only work until

they have two or three news sources in order to create the impression of balanced reporting, instead of making sure that all the reader's questions would be answered.

This is a definite problem, because readers could become bored if they are repeatedly exposed to the same opinions. This could also lead to unbalanced information. It also applies to contact with HIV/Aids organisations. Few HIV/Aids organisations bar the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which has an established media profile, are ever approached for comment. If readers are continuously exposed to, for example, only the opinion of the TAC, they will get a one-sided view of the epidemic. This clearly does not serve the interests of the readers and media expertise within HIV/Aids organisations should receive attention in this context.

Journalists also tend to place an emphasis on official sources, at the expense of opinions on grass roots level. Readers are seldom exposed to ordinary South Africans with the disease. This should receive attention if HIV/Aids is to have a "human face".

- *Use statistics with care, and date data*

Statistics are an important part of news reporting, also in the field of HIV/Aids, because this is often where the news angle lies. According to interest groups, problems with the interpretation of figures often occur. Examples of the meaningful use of statistics were found in the *Sunday Times*. One or two examples where statistics were not used in context, and where they were not attributed to any sources nor dated, were found in *Rapport*. This affects the credibility of a news report. The *Sunday Sun* seldom uses statistics, and once or twice this was found to be a serious deficiency. In general, the use of statistics is in line with interest group recommendations.

- *Be sceptical about claims, especially those involving a cure, clinical trials and HIV/Aids vaccines*

The criticism of interest groups is related to the fact that undue emphasis on claims creates false hope. They encourage journalists to be sceptical. Few examples of reporting in this regard were found, the most notable being a sensational report in the *Sunday Sun* under the heading *My miracle herb cures Aids!* (Dlamini, 2003). Although it is clear that the journalist was a little sceptical (he uses words such as "alleged" and "claims to have discovered"), and followed up the initial report with an investigation and

subsequent item, it should have been handled and presented more carefully from the onset. It is mere responsible journalism to make sure of the facts in full context before publishing a report.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

In the light of the above findings, we come to the general conclusion that the three newspapers do, *to a certain extent*, meet the interest group criteria discussed above. They succeed in raising awareness satisfactorily, as could be expected from the media, and they set an acceptable agenda with regards to the topics they cover. In this regard, one should keep in mind that newspapers are independent entities and that although their news coverage could have educational value, their role is not that of health promoters (vide Beamish, 2002:4682; also see Hirose, Nakaune, Ishizuka & Takanashi, 1998:254).

How these publications set the agenda, is a matter where there is room for improvement, especially in the case of the *Sunday Sun* and, less so, *Rapport*. HIV/Aids reporting in the *Sunday Times* in general seems to be ethically acceptable in as much as it is in line with the interest group criteria.

Regarding genres and sub themes it seems that although there is comprehensive coverage of HIV/Aids issues, critical in-depth reporting is lacking, especially in the *Sunday Sun*. Furthermore, there is too much focus on HIV/Aids politics – especially in *Rapport*, and too little on scientific and social issues relevant to this field. The lack of alternative angles should also receive attention. In addition, positive and constructive news should be emphasised, again especially in *Rapport*. Regarding presentation, the focus on sensationalism in the *Sunday Sun* is noteworthy. All three papers should take care not to overemphasise the “victim image” of the epidemic, and should also pay attention to HIV/Aids sensitive language. Although the general journalistic principles of accuracy are mostly adhered to, there are deficiencies especially where the use of news sources is concerned. Journalists at all papers should take the trouble to cultivate a variety of alternative knowledgeable, credible and trustworthy sources.

The *Sunday Sun* seems willing to pay more attention to HIV/Aids, but one wonders whether there is room for this in the light of the populist nature of the paper (vide Vink, 2005). It is therefore recommended that journalists utilise existing resources offered by interest groups and training institutions in order to enhance the quality of reporting. Where *Rapport* is concerned, the impression exists that the paper is relentless in its stance that HIV/Aids is not a topic which interests its readers and that it would therefore not pay more attention to it according to what interest groups would like to see – even though it is of the opinion that readers should be informed about the epidemic and that newspapers have a role to play to combat stigmatisation (vide Du Plessis, 2005). We come to the conclusion that *Rapport* does not answer to its responsibility to inform its readers in such a way that they can make informed decisions. Because *Rapport* creates the impression that it is indifferent about aspects of the epidemic, this attitude will inevitably filter through to the readers.

The deficiencies still found in news coverage in HIV/Aids reporting more than 20 years since the epidemic started, raises the question whether firmer guidelines in this regard are necessary. This is an area where interest groups could play an important role and where they could have a definite influence on the quality of HIV/Aids reporting. We therefore recommend that a streamlined separate interest group code, comprising of guidelines such as those summarised above, be placed on the table. It would then be up to individual media institutions to decide whether they want to accept these as a separate code of ethics, or rather include them in their own institutional codes.

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