

HIV/Aids reporting in three South African newspapers

ABSTRACT

The nature of HIV/Aids media coverage has been widely criticised, mainly by interest groups. This has resulted in constructive, though somewhat fragmented, guidelines on ethically acceptable, accountable HIV/Aids reporting. In this article the analysed and systematically summarised guidelines (Swanepoel, 2005:77-137) are used to evaluate HIV/Aids reporting in three South African Sunday papers. It was found that these newspapers partially meet the interest group criteria. They raise awareness satisfactorily, but agenda setting could be improved. Although there is comprehensive coverage of HIV/Aids issues, critical, in-depth reporting is lacking. Furthermore, there is an exaggerated focus on HIV/Aids politics, and too little on relevant scientific and social issues. A lack of alternative angles and a tendency towards sensationalism are noticeable. The three papers often emphasise the “victim image”, and fail to use HIV/Aids-sensitive language consistently. In respect of accuracy, there are deficiencies in the use of news sources.

INTRODUCTION

On 5 June 1981, the American Centers for Disease Control identified a new disease among five homosexual men. Owing to the level of scientific understanding and background knowledge required of journalists, this disease would later become one of the most complex journalistic challenges of our time (see Galloway, 2001:1).

In South Africa, a developing country where some 5,3 million people are infected, HIV/Aids is also a huge social problem, which adds to the complexity of reporting on the topic. Not without reason HIV/Aids is described as the greatest issue ever at the development, health and moral levels (see KFF, 2004; James, 2001).

In view of this, 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 (UNESCO, 2006; 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. However, the nature of the coverage has been widely criticised in South (and Southern) Africa, mainly by pressure groups actively involved in the fight against the disease, such as the 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) (all of these collectively called 'interest groups').

The criticism centres on issues not so much pertaining to the frequency of reporting, but rather to how the topic is presented. Several studies have shown problems relevant to sensationalism, inaccuracies and alarmism (see 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 have struggled to develop a positive attitude towards the epidemic since its onset. This kind of "doom and gloom" journalism created the perception that a life with HIV/Aids is synonymous with death (Mukwita, 1999), which 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 on critical and in-depth journalism, and on a lack of attention to the social issues related to HIV/Aids (see Gender Links & MMP, 2006; Mchombu, 1999; Kasoma, 1999; Linda, 1999). This criticism has resulted in constructive, though fragmented, suggestions from interest groups (e.g. the Aids Law Project, the Treatment Action Campaign, the Aids Consortium, the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], and the Centre for Aids Development, Research and Evaluation [CADRE]). Swanepoel (2005:77-137) analysed and systematically summarised these suggestions.

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 the above question, this article endeavours to evaluate HIV/Aids reporting in three South African Sunday newspapers, namely the *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Sun* and *Rapport*, using the suggestions made by these interest groups regarding ethically acceptable reporting.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the dynamic, interactive agenda-setting process, news content is influenced in various ways. The importance of an issue on the media agenda has a direct influence on 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. It is likewise assumed that interest groups could also influence the media agenda (see Dearing & Rogers, 1996:3), and therefore play a potentially important role in influencing 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 context¹. 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 (cf. Knoesen, 2003; Retief, 2002; Selokane, 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 guidelines regarding HIV/Aids reporting. Organisations that have been particularly active in promoting better HIV/Aids reporting are 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 in 2005 (cf. Swanepoel, 2005:XXXIX-XLII). Likewise, and in the same year, the Southern Africa National Editors Forum (SANEF) published a set of principles, called *Guiding Principles for Ethical Reporting of HIV and AIDS & Gender*.²

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 (see Beamish, 2002; Cullinan, 2001; Delate, 2003a; Gysae & Øverland, 2002; Shepperson, 2000; Soul City, 2002):

¹ After the research on which this article is based was conducted, several institutions published formal guidelines, e.g. Reporting Guide on HIV and AIDS for Journalists in Eastern and Southern Africa published by the UNESCO Eastern and Southern Africa Media Strategy Against HIV/AIDS in 2006.

² At the time the research on which this article is based was conducted, the CADRE and SANEF guidelines had not yet been published.

Genres and subthemes:

- Practise critical and in-depth journalism.
- Find fresh news angles, and also pay attention to social issues and activities at the 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, i.e. 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 principles may not have been formally conceptualised as “ethical guidelines”, but clearly fit 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 endeavour to 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 metatheoretical endeavours in the field of media ethics.

2. METHOD OF ANALYSES

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 occurred, thereby enabling 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 content analysis was conducted, this English publication had 3,440 million readers, most being 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 readership market and also the fastest-growing Sunday newspaper (1,930 million [black] readers at the end of 2003). *Rapport*, the only Afrikaans Sunday paper in the country, in 2003 catered for 1,652 million mainly white, but also a significant number of 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. These newspapers are read by the bulk of Sunday newspaper readers in South Africa.

To enhance the reliability of the conclusions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the editors of the newspapers³ to clarify some of the issues that arose during the analysis.

3. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

HIV/Aids reporting in the *Sunday Times*, *Rapport* and the *Sunday Star* is now discussed, with reference to agenda setting as well as the main dimensions of the ethical guidelines, namely genres and subthemes, presentation, language and accuracy.

3.1 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 HIV/Aids coverage is frequent, it could indicate that the issue is high on the news agenda. The prominence of the news items should, however, also be considered.

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

Table 1:

	<i>Sunday Times</i>	<i>Rapport</i>	<i>Sunday Sun</i>
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 with the other two newspapers. This conclusion was confirmed during interviews with the newspaper editors. The *Sunday Times* plans to become more involved in the fight against HIV/Aids (cf. Makhanya, 2005). Although the *Sunday Sun* views the issue as important, it is

³ Interviews were conducted with editors in that editors play a role in establishing policy.

debatable whether more attention will be devoted to it in the near future owing to its populist nature and factors such as staff shortages and a lack of skills (see Vink, 2005).

In the case of *Rapport*, 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 devote more attention to HIV/Aids if more whites (the paper's largest group of readers) become infected⁴ (cf. Du Plessis, 2005).

3.2 Genres and subthemes:

3.2.1 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 placed by interest groups 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 – both characteristic of in-depth reporting – a reader could misinterpret information. The reader could also be misled into thinking 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 and discussed in editorial comment if they are deemed important enough for a stance to be taken. By publishing little in-depth news about HIV/Aids and by assigning less importance to the topic, the publications probably take less responsibility than they should. In so doing, they fail to inform and empower readers fully to take important decisions.

The lack of editorials is consistent with *Rapport's* attitude towards the topic, but could also serve to contradict the stance of the *Sunday Times*, which views the epidemic as being very important. However, when the news coverage on HIV/Aids in the *Sunday Times* is viewed in general, it is clear that the lack of editorials by no means contradicts the fact that the paper views the topic as very important and relevant. Attention is devoted 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, while simultaneously offering sufficient information to readers to form their own opinions. This is done by publishing articles written by role players in the field.

⁴ It would be interesting to investigate HIV/Aids reporting in *Rapport* following the release of the Markinor and UNISA's Bureau of Market Research findings that the epidemic is indeed now spreading rapidly among the educated, wealthy and white population in South Africa (Markinor, 2007).

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 deep-rooted sense of responsibility towards society. This impression, however, does not tie in with the nature of most populist papers that often operate within a Libertarian framework and reject all kinds of restrictions (cf. Siebert et al., 1956:3; Skjerdal, 2001).

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 only sensational information on celebrities warrants attention within an HIV/Aids framework. For example, extensive attention was paid to well-known DJ Fana Khaba's affairs after it had become known that he was HIV positive (Somniso, 2003:4). Emphasis was placed mainly on his promiscuous lifestyle. In a follow-up report, comment from his numerous lovers and the mothers of his children was published under the heading *Khabzela must marry us all, say ex-lovers* (Komane, 2003:5). In comparison, items in the *Sunday Times* are mainly well exploited. The newspaper also uses 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.

3.2.2 *Find fresh news angles, and also pay attention to social issues and activities at the 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. The editor confirmed this, also indicating that HIV/Aids politics is the only related topic that really interests him (Du Plessis [2005]). 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 received the most attention in the *Sunday Sun*, but the topic was covered within the context of celebrities, e.g. when Khaba announced his HIV-positive status, or sensational events, such as the gang rape of an HIV-positive man (Skosana & Dlamini, 2003:4).

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 (see Froneman, 2002:39-43). 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" be given to the epidemic by writing about ordinary people. Another issue receiving attention in the *Sunday Sun* relates to claims and cures, such as the claims of a Shoshanguve man that he found a so-called miracle herb (Dlamini, 2003:1, 7), which appeared under the headings *Man claims to cure Aids*, and *My miracle herb*

cures Aids! Themes like these are again sensational. 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 to be one of the most important news themes. It is, however, in line with his statement that health is a subject that is approached in a rather haphazard way.

Topics receiving 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 (see Sheridan Burns, 2002:49-62; Hausman, 1990:13-15; Leiter et al., 2000:30-44; Mencher, 1997:55-70; Nel, 1999:19-32). A research story that did arouse the news interest of *Rapport* was the first case of woman-to-woman transmission of HIV in the USA (Jongbloed, 2003:10). It is a pity, however, that the report focused only on the sensational facts.

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 much media criticism against the new government's unwillingness to adhere to traditional scientific opinions about the epidemic, and its unwillingness to do something for those South Africans already infected. HIV/Aids became a stick with which politicians and the public could beat 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 Durban Declaration dominating the 13th International HIV/Aids Conference in Durban in 2000. This document was signed by thousands of national and international scientists, reflecting their renewed commitment to the traditional scientific view that HIV and Aids were directly linked. The "causal debate", however, caused more problems in that 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 scientific research on HIV/Aids (Cullinan, 2001).

On the other hand, the politicised epidemic placed even more pressure on health reporters when political or news writers who were not knowledgeable about HIV/Aids covered the main event, and then passed the story on to the health reporter who often had to do damage control. This inevitably clouded relationships with news sources in the field.

The political theme probably receives most attention on the opinion pages of the three newspapers in question. The editor of *Rapport*, a former political writer, often takes politicians such as Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, South African Minister of Health, to task. Her affiliation with the so-called Aids dissidents, for example, received attention, as did her quarrel with a German man on an international flight after he had refused to sit next to her because he did not support the way she handled HIV/Aids in South Africa (Van Wyk, 2003:12). Political conflict, e.g. conflict between the South African government and the TAC about a comprehensive treatment programme, was paramount. The fact that the editor pays attention to these issues shows that the newspaper views HIV/Aids politics as important (as indicated above).

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

The lack of new news angles could also be ascribed to the limited variety of news sources used (see the paragraph on news sources.) All of the 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. For example, when the “father of township theatre” Gibson Kente revealed that he was HIV positive, coverage in the *Sunday Times* praised Kente for taking the brave disclosure step, an action that is in South Africa viewed as crucial in the fight against the pandemic (Mondi, 2003:21). Conversely, the *Sunday Sun* places much emphasis on the stale topic of how a person became infected. This kind of reporting does not measure up to the requirement of “boeiend aangebode nuus” (riveting news), as suggested by Snyman (1990:66) in setting a framework for ethically acceptable journalism.

It seems as though the *Sunday Sun* prefers using copy from other publications in the group (Media24) when more scientific themes are tackled. This probably results from a lack of human resources, an assumption confirmed by Vink (2005) when he says that most of the information on the health page originates from Health24, an affiliated internet source, because the *Sunday Sun* does not have the capacity to handle the subject.

3.2.3 *Also focus on positive and constructive news*

Regarding the relationship between negative reporting, and the reporting that is both positive and uplifting about the epidemic, the publications generally maintain a balance. Mainly two news frames were created: a negative, “doom and gloom” frame, and a positive image of the syndrome as being a controllable condition that ensures a long and productive life. In the *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Sun* a balance is struck between these two extremes. One noteworthy example of publicity that could reduce stigma and stereotyping is the way in which the *Sunday Times* handled the Fana Khaba affair. Their reports mainly focused on how the DJ was supported by his colleagues, and that a message of hope should be spread. Likewise, a news report on playwright Gibson Kente’s HIV-positive status focused on how empowered he felt because he admired people like the American basketball star Magic Johnson for being open about their status (Mofokeng, 2003:3). This strengthens

the message that it is positive to be tested and to disclose one's status. On the other hand, the heading of this particular story, *I was naughty, says Kente*, could negatively influence the positive message in the body text.

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. Even a report about an HIV-positive 13-year-old school boy created an image of a victim and a life with HIV/Aids, which is a constant struggle (Smith, 2003:20). Clearly, continuously negative presentation has ethical implications because it could isolate people with the syndrome and worsen stigmatisation. *Rapport* will hopefully address the negative stance it takes on HIV/Aids in order to adhere to the reasonable 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.

3.3 Presentation:

3.3.1 Avoid sensational reporting through language, content and presentation

With regard to prominence, 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, e.g. *Aids charity denied UN funds* (Jubasi, 2003:1), *Top radio jock says he is HIV-positive* (Mofokeng, 2003:3). This clearly places the issue high on the news agenda. In contrast, *Rapport* mostly used items on the epidemic further back in the paper, thereby indicating that the epidemic was not that high on the agenda, but still noteworthy (Du Plessis, 2005).

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 these towards the back of the paper (e.g. the item on research about the causal factors of HIV, which was used on p. 20 [Health.24, 2003:20]), while news on well-known people and celebrities, and more trivial detail were used very prominently and graphically on the more important news pages towards the front of the paper (e.g. the stories about Fana Khaba that appeared on p.4 [Somniso, 2003:4]). Although this supports Vink's (2005) opinion that the paper focuses on celebrities, it also confirms 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, and not in line with the guideline formulated above.

3.3.2 Avoid stereotyping and discrimination

With regard to stereotyping and sensationalism in presentation, the conclusion can be drawn that the *Sunday Times* and *Rapport* are mainly ethically responsible. Yet, stereotyping in the use of language, is quite often encountered. Good taste is widely exercised, with the exception of the cartoon in the *Sunday Times* portraying people with HIV/Aids as Jesus Christ on the cross and

Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, Minister of Health, as a Roman soldier withholding nourishment in the form of antiretroviral drugs (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Another example of questionable taste is the explicit language used by the *Sunday Sun* to describe the ordeal of an HIV-positive man when he was allegedly raped by a gang of men (Skosana & Dlamini, 2003:4). 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 (cf. Froneman & De Beer, 1998:295-296).

3.4 Language:

3.4.1 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 fail to 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 if not a "dreaded disease"? Interest

groups prefer not to have the epidemic described in this manner. Examples of such “unacceptable use of language” (occurring frequently in especially the *Sunday Sun*), include phrases such as “... like a creeping monster, HIV/Aids can strike anybody down ...”, “slowly eaten up by the deadly virus”, “...until Aids did them part”, and “And like a ruthless intruder, it spiralled their pathetic lives down into the gorge of death” (Khumalo, 2003:12).

We do, however, feel that it is necessary to tell people how ravaging Aids is to make sure they do not become unconcerned, but without the reporting 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 with reference to a list compiled from interest group suggestions [cf. Beamish, 2002; 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”.

The conclusion to 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. The few exceptions can be blamed on ill-considered copy editing, and ignorance on the part of the writer and copy editor. It is our submission that this is mainly the result 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.

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

The main point of criticism, by far, is the fact that all of the 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 frequently cover the topic. One could deduce 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 should be addressed.

3.5 Accuracy:

3.5.1 *Reporting should be accurate, i.e. 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 revealed that journalists at the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Sun* and *Rapport* were mostly well grounded in the basic journalistic principles, but that they did make mistakes within the framework of HIV/Aids. There were many careless errors, for example where the spelling of names and the use of titles are concerned, but no grave concerns were identified.

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 in contextualising properly, which results in shallow reporting. Furthermore, the impression was created that little trouble was taken to gain the background information necessary to write quality reports. The conclusion is that ignorance causes most problems in this regard. Journalists could thus benefit from using HIV/Aids resources (e.g. from interest groups).

The HIV/Aids coverage in the three publications is comprehensive *within the narrower context of the specific news item*. The several examples of “no” or “little comment” we found, is consistent with the finding of a lack of in-depth reporting. Yet, completeness should 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 (see 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.

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

The investigation showed that all of the three publications do use appropriate 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 – especially not people with HIV/Aids as being the sources most qualified to comment on issues pertaining to the pandemic. 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 readers’ questions are answered.

This is a definite problem, because readers could become bored if they are repeatedly exposed to the same opinions. This also applies to contact with HIV/Aids organisations. Few HIV/Aids organisations – bar the 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 form a one-sided view of the epidemic. This clearly does not serve the interests of the readers. Media expertise within HIV/Aids organisations should receive attention.

Journalists also tend to place an emphasis on official sources, at the expense of opinions at the grass-roots level. Readers are seldom exposed to ordinary South Africans with the disease. If HIV/Aids is to have a “human face”, this should be addressed.

3.5.3 *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 even found to be a serious deficiency. In general, the use of statistics is in line with interest group recommendations.

3.5.4 *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 such reporting were found, the most notable being a sensational report in the *Sunday Sun* under the heading *My miracle herb cures Aids!* (Dlamini, 2003:7). Although it is clear that the journalist was a little sceptical (using 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 outset. Besides, it is sound and responsible journalism to make sure of the facts in full context before publishing a report.

4. CONCLUSION

In the light of the above findings, we come to the general conclusion that the three newspapers do, *to an extent*, meet the interest group criteria discussed above. They succeed in raising awareness satisfactorily, as can be expected of the media, and they set an acceptable agenda with regard to the topics they cover.

How these publications set the agenda, leaves room for improvement, especially in the case of the *Sunday Sun* and, to a lesser degree, *Rapport*. HIV/Aids reporting in the *Sunday Times* generally seems to be ethically acceptable.

Regarding genres and subthemes, 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. The 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 in respect of the use of news sources. 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 devote more attention to HIV/Aids, but, in view of the populist nature of the paper, one should not expect greater depth (see Vink, 2005). By utilising existing resources offered by interest groups and training institutions, the quality of reporting could be enhanced.

Rapport creates the impression that the paper is relentless in its stance that HIV/Aids is not a topic of interest to its readers and that it will therefore not pay as much attention to it as the interest groups would like to see – this despite its being of the opinion that readers should be informed about the epidemic and that newspapers have a role to play in combating stigmatisation (see Du Plessis, 2005). Because *Rapport* creates the impression that it is indifferent about aspects of the epidemic, this attitude will inevitably filter through to the readers.

In criticising aspects of the newspapers' reporting, one should bear in mind that newspapers are private commercial entities and that although their news coverage could have educational value, their role is not that of health promoters (see Beamish, 2002; also see Hirose, Nakaune, Ishizuka & Takanashi, 1998:254). They also focus on different readerships with varying needs (as perceived and interpreted by the editors) (see Swanepoel et al., 2005).

Notwithstanding these caveats and the positive aspects found in the news coverage of HIV/Aids, the deficiencies found underline the need for an ongoing debate about the ethical dimension of journalism and the media's role in society. This will benefit reporting on all ethically sensitive topics, including HIV/Aids.

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