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## 25 years of reporting HIV: What lessons can Pacific journalists learn?

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## **25 years of reporting HIV: What lessons can Pacific journalists learn?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the findings of two studies that tracked press coverage of HIV/AIDS in several southern African countries and Papua New Guinea (PNG) from the mid-1980s. The main reason for their selection is that they are the most extensive studies to date on the topic in Southern Africa and the Pacific region and the countries share distinct cultural similarities. The findings, while wide-ranging, do present new challenges for Pacific journalists who report on HIV - a disease that has seen massive increases in some parts of the region since the mid-1980s. Common trends in the countries surveyed revealed that a disproportionate emphasis was placed upon reporting infection rates, international funding and regional workshops, with little in-depth analysis of the disease or educational content. On the positive side, the language and tone of HIV stories showed more sensitivity to people living with the disease. It was no surprise that there was little agreement on the precise role of the press in reporting HIV. This is a key issue that remains unsolved. There was, however, broad agreement that journalists should widen their coverage and report HIV as a story with medical, political, social, economic, cultural, religious and relationship aspects. Also, journalists should try to report the story in a way that lessens fear and stigma, two key factors that act as major barriers to promoting openness and debate.

### **HIV/AIDS: An exceptional threat to the Pacific region**

An estimated 7100 people acquired HIV in the Pacific during 2006, bringing to 81,000 (or between 50,000–170,000) the estimated number of people living with the virus. Three quarters of those persons are in PNG where the epidemic is serious and expanding (UNAIDS, 2006 p 61). Some 1.8 per cent of the adult population in PNG is infected with HIV and prevalence in urban areas maybe as high as 3.5 per cent (UNAIDS, 2006). Rates of new infections have increased about 30 per cent per year since 1997. A report by the PNG National AIDS Council Secretariat (NACS) in May 2006 suggested an infection rate of over 100,000 people in PNG and predicts that the current HIV/AIDS epidemic sweeping the country will eventually match the massive infection rates seen in some African countries.

Clement Malau, former director of NACS, insists the massive epidemic of HIV/AIDS in many Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe — where HIV

infection rates are as high as 25 per cent — could be repeated in PNG. “Given the current situation in PNG, we could go the same way as many Sub-Saharan African countries” (Malau, 2005). A similar statement was made a year earlier when Dr Yves Renault, the World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in PNG, said: “It is possible that the number of infections could reach one million in 10-15 years unless decisive action is taken” (Renault, 2004). These remarks, together with other statements by international health officials, demonstrate that PNG is facing a rapidly expanding public health crisis that challenges not only politicians but also business, religious, medical, media, legal and civil leaders to find an appropriate response.

The other 21 countries and territories in the South Pacific are not immune from what is happening in PNG. While the number of HIV infections are low, annual infections rates are on the rise. Apart from PNG, only four exceed 150 cases. These include New Caledonia (246), Guam (173), French Polynesia (220) and Fiji (171). It should, however, be noted that the data are based on limited HIV surveillance (UNAIDS, 2006). Given the high levels of other sexually transmitted infections that have been recorded in some Pacific islands, none of these countries and territories can afford to be complacent. Only one quarter of persons deemed at-risk of HIV infection in Fiji, Kiribati and Vanuatu, for example, know how to prevent HIV infections and do not harbour major misconceptions about HIV transmission. In Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, nine per cent of young men said they had bought sex in the previous 12 months, yet only one in 10 reported using condoms consistently during commercial sex. About 12 per cent of young men said they used condoms consistently with casual partners. Meanwhile, one in five of young men reported having sex with other men (UNAIDS, 2006 p. 62).

This shows that risk factors associated with HIV outbreaks are not only prevalent in PNG but throughout the region. The list includes: denial of the problem or lack of adequate knowledge about the virus; a rapid rise in the number of sexually transmitted infections (STIs); low condom use; increasing migration and widespread incidents of domestic violence. Wider problems include inadequate health and counselling facilities together with extremely low access to antiretroviral drugs. These factors increase the likelihood of widespread infections rates in the Region.

The HIV/AIDS Project Director of the Lowry Institute for International Policy, Brett Bowtell, is worried for the whole region. He states that while two per cent of Papua New Guinea's population is infected with HIV, it would be a serious mistake to be relaxed and complacent about the outlook in the rest of Melanesia and the South Pacific. “HIV spreads first where there's social dislocation, poverty and high numbers of young people, which pretty much describes most of the Pacific” (Bowtell, 2007). HIV is indeed a story of crucial

importance and all audiences deserve full, clear and intelligent coverage. The next section examines how the press in southern Africa and PNG reported HIV since the mid-1980s.

## **Press coverage of HIV/AIDS**

One major reason for the focus on press reports of HIV/AIDS rather than a wider study on media coverage of the disease is due, in a large part, to more effective access to archival print data. Print copy is easier to locate and avoids the long arduous task of trawling through broadcast tapes of the 1980s and 1990s when transcripts were not readily available. Also, newspapers are influential because news stories that appear in print or online are frequently used by radio and television news editors to provide background, and often actual content, for their daily broadcast news services. Moreover, the press can keep issues and debates in the public forum and move items onto and up the political agenda (Conley & Lambie, 2006, p. 27). This section briefly summarises the findings of two studies that reviewed coverage of the disease in Southern Africa and PNG.

A study by the Panos Institute (2004) - *Lessons from today and tomorrow: An analysis of HIV/AIDS reporting in Southern Africa* – analysed newspaper reporting of the disease in eight Southern African countries from 1985 - 2003. These included: South Africa, Botswana, Malawi, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The research methodology for this project involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis of newspaper articles to determine the quality and quantity of HIV/AIDS stories. The country researchers used random sampling to select articles for analysis (Panos, 2004, p. 16). The major overall finding from these countries is the improvement in press coverage from the early 1980s when there was a lack of understanding, and stories on HIV/AIDS were often sensational in content and insensitive to sufferers. By the 1990s, the language underwent a transformation and descriptions of ‘killer disease’ and ‘AIDS victims’ were dropped and replaced by the more sensitive ‘PLWA’ (People Living With AIDS) and ‘AIDS pandemic’. There was also a push to widen coverage and report the story as a development issue rather than a purely health-related matter. Stories of hope appeared especially when anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) were introduced and negative reports, scary statistics and photographs of emaciated PLWA were less prevalent than during the early stages of coverage. On the negative side, stories on HIV/AIDS remain largely event and personality-driven and there are few adequately trained staff to report on this complex disease.

The study revealed that the press in all eight Southern African countries did not have in-house policies on HIV/AIDS, and suggests that having a policy in place could help present a coherent approach and give the topic the priority it deserved. And while the press remained a major source of information on HIV in the region, it failed to decode technical jargon and

avoided a pro-active and investigative approach to the problem (Panos, 2004, p. 48). Recommendations included a call for journalists to be formally trained, and editors in particular, about how to report on HIV/AIDS and to amplify the voices of those most affected and infected by the disease. The need to continually challenge governments and NGOs in their response to the epidemic was encouraged, especially in matters of funding and the implementation of national HIV/AIDS policies and programmes.

### **Reporting HIV/AIDS in PNG (1987-2005)**

The first content analysis of press reports of HIV/AIDS in PNG (covering 1987-1999) was conducted by Cullen (2000) who focused mainly on PNG because it had more than 75 per cent of all HIV/AIDS cases in the southern Pacific region and the largest number of media outlets. Cullen's research opted for a quantitative analysis of all HIV/AIDS stories in PNG's two daily newspapers, *The National* and the *Post-Courier* from 1987 when the first HIV case was discovered, to 1999 when the first act of Parliament concerning HIV was introduced.

PNG has two daily newspapers. The first, the *Post-Courier*, started in 1969 and has been, until recently, the largest-selling South Pacific daily with a circulation of 25,549. Murdoch's News Limited holds 62.5 per cent of the shares while private shareholders account for 27.5 per cent. The second newspaper, the *National*, began operating in late 1993. It is owned by a Malaysian firm, Monarch Investments, a subsidiary of timber company Rimbunan Hijau and sells 29,706 copies a day (*The National*, 31 August, 2007).

Content analysis involved identifying each newspaper cutting on HIV/AIDS as an editorial, a letter, a local story, a foreign story, a front-page story or a feature. These categories followed closely those chosen by Kasoma (1990 and 1995) and Pitt and Jackson (1993) when these researchers analysed press coverage of HIV/AIDS in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Findings from the research in PNG revealed that while editors and journalists did cover the story, they preferred to report official figures for HIV together with news items on workshops, budgets and international donations. Educational messages on HIV prevention were omitted (Cullen, 2000, p. 233).

Another study in 2005 tried to discover whether reporting of the disease in the PNG press increased or decreased since the previous study by Cullen (2000) and whether certain types of news stories – HIV figures, workshops, budgets, donations – continued to be the major news topics or if the list increased to include news items on prevention and people living with HIV. Data collection included all news items on HIV/AIDS over a three-month period. The websites of both newspapers were used to collect data for the research and it was considered important to select a particular week in consecutive months so as to achieve some form of

comparative study. Because it was difficult to retrieve online archival material, the author downloaded the stories on the actual day that they appeared online.

News coverage of the disease increased in both newspapers during the period of study. For example, compared to the previous research, the *National* recorded more news items in the three selected weeks in 2005 than the whole of the first three months of 1999; 13 in 1999 compared to 19 news stories in 2005 (Cullen 2005, p. 145). The scope and focus of press coverage, however, did not change. News items on HIV workshops, the latest infection figures and ‘harms’ scored the largest number of stories, mimicking the results of Cullen’s previous study (Cullen, 2000, p. 166). The category ‘harms’ refers to a news story that describes the consequences of contracting HIV, namely sickness, stigma and death. Attempts to humanise the story resulted in four stories on people living with AIDS and four human interest stories about people caring for those living with the disease. News items on prevention and protection, however, did not appear in the 2005 study and only one such item appeared in the corresponding period in the first three months of 2000 (Cullen, 2005, p. 144). This is a significant finding – that none of the news items contained direct educational messages about ways to avoid infection. This is particularly worrying when considering that the number of HIV infections in PNG continues to show large increases in all 20 provinces and figures could reach Sub-Saharan African proportions in a few years. There were no feature articles on the disease (during the study period) in either daily newspaper, not even in the weekend magazine editions.

### **Obstacles to reporting HIV**

It must be noted that the disease is a difficult story to report. Since the mid-1980s, academic research on journalism’s roles and responsibilities, news selection processes and news values in relation to HIV frequently points to organisational constraints and traditional newsgathering practices as real obstacles to improving the informational and educational content of news stories on HIV. The general staff reporter does not know a great deal about HIV/AIDS. With very few exceptions, journalists do not have specialist knowledge in the field they report on. This is not a matter of low standards for the occupation but an explicit recognition by newsroom managers that specialist knowledge is not required to get the job done. Specialist knowledge can be counter-productive, leading the reporter to look for complexity and to qualify information, when what news discourse requires is a simple transformation into common sense (Nelkin, 1989, p. 61). Journalists are constantly under pressure from their newsroom editors who want definitive answers. This desire for certainty often leads journalists to convey the idea that science is a solution to the problem of complicated issues (Nelkin, 1989, p. 60).

Mellwaine (2001) emphasises that the imperatives of journalism differ from those of health professionals. Newsmakers are interested in the novel, the sensational, the human-interest angle and the dramatic (Mellwaine, 2001, p. 168). This tension between journalists and health professionals is clearly stated by Lupton, Chapman and Wong (1993). Referring to journalists, these researchers state: "Their task is to sell their commodity - news - not to serve as the campaigning arm of health education bodies. The manner in which journalists report issues such as HIV/AIDS can therefore detract from the goals of health educators" (Lupton et al, 1993 p. 6). It is, moreover, generally recognised that educating the public about HIV/AIDS is not solely the responsibility of media. Also, scientists and public health officials have not always been willing to share information (Miller & Williams, 1993, p.136).

Cultural influences must also be considered. Caldwell's research on HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s points to several cultural factors that hinder wider debate of the disease. Many people feel helpless to change the course of events because they believe that witchcraft or other supernatural forces play at least some part in causing HIV. With sickness of any sort there is usually a cause and a causer which shows that the person infected has no real control of his or her situation. This may explain to some extent why the disease is so readily accepted (Caldwell, 1999, pp. 241-256). Other obstacles include the fact that the general public are often complacent about the crisis and people tend to look at immediate needs rather than at a virus which could develop into AIDS in 10 years. And without a cure, there seems to be no point in creating further hopelessness. Then, there is the fear of testing positive because it would bring shame and possible danger to the rest of the family. The result is that a great majority of the people do not want to know about HIV and do not want to be tested. Matters related to sexual behaviour are rarely discussed in public because sex is still a taboo subject and the connection of HIV/AIDS to sex runs the risk of linking people with HIV/AIDS to illicit sex (Caldwell and Orubuloye, 1992, p. 1170).

Seven out of 10 editors in PNG interviewed by Cullen (2000 & 2002) said talking about sex or reporting someone living or dying of AIDS were issues they preferred to avoid because of cultural and traditional beliefs. This form of self-censorship highlights the impact of cultural influences upon editors in PNG. Newspaper editors, however, in the French territories of Tahiti and New Caledonia were not embarrassed to use phrases like 'condom' and 'sexual intercourse' in press reports on HIV/AIDS. This was not the case in countries like Samoa where it is virtually outlawed to use such terminology. The *Post-Courier* and the *National* have tried to insert educational messages in their newspapers. Yet, there was a mixed reaction to the use of the word 'Koap', a strong and explicit term – introduced into HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns by the National AIDS Council – to describe sexual intercourse. Eventually, the editor of the *National* omitted the word from his newspaper because he said it was too strong and explicit.

## **Recommendations for journalists**

Journalists in the Pacific and elsewhere in the world have a core responsibility to inform and educate the public about both the short and long-term effects of HIV. While the media have a significant role to play in informing the public and holding governments to account, a more immediate problem is how journalists report effectively on a disease that has been around for more than 20 years, as is the case in PNG. It is evident from the data on press coverage of the disease in PNG that a disproportionate emphasis is placed upon reporting infection rates, international funding and regional workshops, with little in-depth analysis of the disease or educational content. And while the language and tone of HIV stories show more sensitivity to people living with HIV, both surveys highly recommend that editors and journalists widen coverage of the disease and report HIV as a development story with medical, political, social, economic, cultural, religious and relationship aspects. The Panos study re-emphasised this last point by stressing that too many stories in some southern African countries were still event or personality driven with a preference for short news stories rather than in depth feature articles. Over-reliance on government media releases as the major source of information created a reactive rather than proactive approach. Calls to amplify the voices of those infected and affected by the disease were recommended together with the need to continually challenge governments' responses to the epidemic.

Lack of editorial policy and educational material on HIV was mentioned in both surveys. While current and former PNG editors and journalists should be highly commended for consistently tracking and reporting the spread of the disease for the past decade, it may be time to shift focus and to balance information with educational content. It is not a question of whether this approach is more effective but rather a recognition that both elements are an essential part of reporting the story, regardless of their impact on reducing the rate of HIV infections. However, the authors noted that achieving a common consensus on the role and duties of the press in regards to reporting HIV/AIDS is still problematic

## **Future Challenges**

Anna Solomon, a highly respected former PNG journalist whose reporting career in the Pacific spanned more than 30 years, declared that "AIDS is boring to report - so let's try to make it interesting" (Solomon, 2002). While recognising the seriousness of the unfolding HIV epidemic in her country, the former editor also realised that due to its long 'shelf life' journalists in the Pacific needed to use imagination, initiative and sensitivity when reporting on the disease.

There are many stories on HIV beyond the overwhelming statistics that often dominate AIDS reporting. Here are a few story ideas that journalists in some southern Africa and



Pacific countries reported on. The story of how someone lives with HIV and the effect on their family, relatives, school and local village. Stories like this help to demystify the disease and gradually lessen the paralysing fear associated with it. Some journalists described programmes being run by NGOs and churches or covered the inventive ways that certain communities pass on prevention messages such as through drama and traditional festivals. Other challenges involve debating the current status of woman, challenging stigma, addressing men's roles in HIV prevention, exposing the state of the health service and calling for decisive leadership. These issues are directly linked with development and take the story to another level. Moreover, reporting on these issues can potentially help to build public policy, create a supportive environment and strengthen community action.

Finally, political leadership has proved a vital component in the struggle to stem the rise of HIV infections in other parts of the world. This is clear from the decline of infections in Uganda, Thailand and the Gambia where the political leaders of these countries spoke openly and constantly about the epidemic. This helped lessen the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in the local communities, and galvanised them into action as they defined the struggle against HIV as a national cause and campaign, which is exactly what Pacific Leaders need to do more consistently. Let us not forget the rallying call by a Pacific politician, former Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and his statement on the increase of HIV/AIDS in PNG and the South Pacific region. Sadly, his metaphorical description of the HIV epidemic in 1996 sounds increasingly more prophetic in 2007:

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Pacific is a clear enough signal that there is a storm gathering force; a storm that can become a devastating hurricane such as we have never seen before and a storm which, if we do not take the necessary precautions, we will not live through or we will regret forever (Rabuka, 1996).

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