

Barcelona: media perspectives

Media coverage of HIV/AIDS is a process, rather than an event

By Aulora Stally

“Are you a doctor?” quipped the visa official when I submitted my application for a Spanish visa in Harare, Zimbabwe to attend the IVth International World AIDS Conference in Barcelona in July 2002. “No, I’m a journalist,” I responded. “There are too many different people attending this ... we are giving preference to doctors because it is an AIDS conference” she remarked, reluctantly taking my documents and asking me to check by telephone after five working days. I was eventually granted my visa. Upon collecting my passport, I witnessed mounting chaos in the Spanish embassy’s tiny foyer, congested with frustrated applicants from non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, AIDS service organisations, People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAS) and various other institutions. Each one of them had to justify their application – as if the form itself wasn’t detailed enough! That the official country hosts were uninformed – or rather ignorant - about basic HIV/AIDS knowledge was a cause for concern. Have we made any headway with our media and communications campaigns that seek to improve basic understanding and awareness of HIV/AIDS, let alone promote behaviour change?

Nearly 20 years into the epidemic, HIV/AIDS continues to be viewed predominantly as a health issue. However, we continue to feel its impact in our daily lives. HIV/AIDS has affected us directly through the loss of loved friends, family, colleagues and relatives - or indirectly by us knowing of someone who has HIV or has died of AIDS. As the scientific world continues to search for a cure, media coverage of HIV/AIDS remains an integral component of any successful HIV/AIDS programme. Information, if targeted effectively and well packaged, is a powerful tool that can improve HIV/AIDS knowledge, reduce stigma and promote behavioural change.

But how many of us as doctors, academics, researchers, activists, institutions, organisations and individuals have established liaisons with the media for regular share and exchange of information? How many of us have media policies as part of our operations that allow for routine coverage of our programme and project work? What good are we doing if we do not engage with the media to widely publicise our activities - be it addressing stigma and discrimination, workplace issues, research trends, policies and legislation? Research continues to reflect that mass media are a strategic resource in shaping and influencing public attitudes and perceptions. Thus, relevant information through targeted communication channels not only promotes awareness and knowledge, but influences behaviour change among individuals and within communities.

These pertinent questions haunted me as I walked through the exhibition floors, the poster halls, the training workshops and satellite meetings at the Fira de Barcelona Conference Centre in Spain. Barcelona attracted the largest ever conference attendance with over 14 000 delegates, 1 500 as media participants. Some have argued that the attraction of a Spanish summer was an incentive that resulted in big numbers, whilst others suggest there were greater funding opportunities for media

participation. However, and most importantly, the media can no longer ignore HIV/AIDS, its growing prevalence, and its impact at macro and micro levels. HIV/AIDS is the story of the millennium; it is entwined in wars, food security, industry, conflicts, religion and politics; it affects the very fabric of society, and therefore must be mainstreamed into the media agenda – not as a news item, but as a news ‘need’.

It’s no surprise that media coverage of HIV/AIDS peaked before, during and post July 2002 where scientific breakthroughs, political commitment, declarations, activist demonstrations and marginalised voices were heard through a variety of media channels. In a rare circumstance, HIV/AIDS was transformed into front-page news in national and regional newspapers during mid-July. Audiences worldwide woke up to daily reports of the conference goings-on, polished profiles, pictorials and policies of top officials, and allowed ministers to make the news. Readers were even offered lighter, more creative editorials on Gaudi architecture and other ‘tourism-musts’ in Barcelona; and we also read about the unfortunate stories of con artists and mugged delegates. A free daily newspaper summed up conference proceedings. There was no shortage of information. As with all major international AIDS conferences, calls were made for better, more improved responses to HIV/AIDS, increased funding and sponsorship, integrated approaches involving the community, scientific breakthroughs and access to treatment for the developing world.

However, this event-driven media splurge was short-lived.

Thus, is the media’s role simply to act as a mouthpiece for its sponsors by regurgitating conference proceedings and spelling out rhetoric? Will such event-driven coverage assist in the urgent response to HIV/AIDS, counter misinformation, reduce stigma and bring about behaviour change that is necessary to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS? We need to think further about the strategic role of the media in sustaining HIV/AIDS coverage. Journalists must shift away from conventional-type reporting such as commenting on new initiatives for prevention, reporting on conferences, and describing updated data. Instead more focus should centre on the scale, reality and impact of HIV/AIDS in all sectors of society.

There are so many untold HIV/AIDS stories for the media to investigate, and what better resource than the voice of the community? Personalising HIV/AIDS means giving the epidemic a human face, because behind every statistic, there is a unique story to tell. Now is the time for journalists to use the power of the pen effectively to develop stories that present human-interest angles and approaches to make HIV/AIDS a sustained, newsworthy topic. Such coverage can promote interpersonal communication that is fundamental in challenging behaviour and attitudes that promote the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Media advocacy can assist in sustaining coverage of HIV/AIDS on the news agenda. A well-networked individual or organisation can function as an active advocate, skilled in communicating HIV/AIDS issues to the media and vice versa, and keeping both sectors informed of emerging trends linked to the epidemic. So, make it your decision to treat HIV/AIDS coverage as a process and not an event around World AIDS Day. In fact, make it your business to continually seek information to support and strengthen your coverage of HIV/AIDS - and disseminate it widely. Form

partnerships with organisations and individuals who can become key spokespeople. The media's pivotal role is societal – and this not only means informing and educating, but acting as a catalyst for change.

Finally, if we have difficulty in getting our visas for Thailand 2004, we still haven't done enough!

11.10 AGENDA

An electronic media initiative developed at Barcelona 2002 is the 11.10 AGENDA media network, following criticism that global media coverage of HIV/AIDS hardly reflects the realities, scale and experiences of media professionals and the communities they serve in the developing world - where HIV infection is highest. 11:10 AGENDA's founding members represent 60 developing nations, including Latvia, Nigeria, South Africa, Bermuda, Colombia, Malawi, Nepal, Philippines, and China. The network seeks to:

- strategically network, develop and share skills, resources and ideas
- rectify the imbalances of information between the developed and developing nations
- honour and respect diversity and the lives of the infected people the media reports on
- support the right of media professionals to report freely and without fear of reprisal
 - promote ethical reporting of HIV/AIDS

Further information about 11:10 AGENDA can be obtained from
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