

## An Examination of the Language Use of Selected South African Newspapers for Reporting HIV/AIDS

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**ABSTRACT** This study investigates HIV/AIDS coverage in selected South African newspapers. The rationale for the study hinges on the fact that the media's role in informing society about social issues, such as HIV/AIDS, is of paramount importance. Four daily newspapers were analyzed, namely: Daily Dispatch, Daily Sun, Sowetan and The Star. A total of 288 editions of newspapers, spanning a period of twelve months (January to December 2010) were sampled. This study is informed by agenda setting theory. Discourse analysis was used to determine the compliance of these newspapers to media guides on the use of appropriate language or terminologies when disseminating HIV/AIDS stories. Results revealed that these newspapers used appropriate terminology and value-neutral language in their stories. The study recommends that media should not engage in sensational reporting as this tends to create fear, hatred, rejection and despondency amongst people living with HIV/AIDS.

### INTRODUCTION

HIV/AIDS has left many families moaning for their beloved ones and it still hurts people in different ways. The mass media have a crucial role to play in the fight against the pandemic. In playing this role, it is important for the media to disseminate appropriate information and use acceptable terminologies and value-neutral language on HIV/AIDS issues. Value-neutral language will allow journalists to present HIV/AIDS as reality and those affected parts of society will not feel offended if appropriate language is incorporated in the reports. In relation to this, Hopson (2000) suggests that the selective use of language can trivialize an event or render it important, marginalize some groups and empower others; define an issue as an urgent problem or reduce it to a routine one. This suggests that journalists need to be careful in their choice of language, when reporting on HIV/AIDS issues, as this might help in curbing this epidemic.

Qakisa (2003:49) proposes that "another problem that may have influenced the way in which the AIDS issues are reported is the issue of language and presentation". In this regard, the use of negative and stigmatizing language in reporting HIV/AIDS issues discourages people living with this disease from disclosing their status. Therefore, HIV/AIDS stories need to be accurate, fair and balanced in order to convince readers, listeners and viewers about the effects of this pandemic.

This paper assumes that the use of appropriate language in reporting HIV/AIDS issues by media can be useful in curtailing the spread of this epidemic as well as reducing discrimination from those who are infected and affected by this disease. This is why Undie et al. (2007:4) point out that "language shapes the way we think about life, and therefore influences our actions". Therefore, this paper intends to investigate the selected South African newspapers particularly in relation to the use of value-neutral language when reporting HIV/AIDS related issues.

Indispensably, the main objective for this paper is:

- i. To determine whether selected South African newspapers comply with guidelines proposed for language use in reporting HIV/AIDS issues or not.

Specifically, the study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent is the language use of South African newspapers acceptable for HIV/AIDS reporting?
2. What is the direction of the language use of South African newspapers for HIV/AIDS reporting? Positive or Negative?

### HIV/AIDS in South Africa

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate HIV/AIDS coverage in South African newspapers particularly in the use of value-neutral language. First of all, the paper will look at the

HIV/AIDS situation in South Africa and whether media is taking appropriate steps in combating this epidemic.

Southern Africa is often described as the epicenter of the global AIDS epidemic (Birdsall and Kelly 2007:15). Among all Southern African countries, South Africa has been identified as the most severely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It is believed that, in 2010, an estimated 310,000 South Africans died of AIDS out of a population of 50 million. According to a report released by UNAIDS in 2010, the HIV/AIDS infection rate in South Africa was 17.8 percent among those aged 15-49. The report indicated that almost one-in-three women aged 25-29, and over a quarter of the men aged 30-34, were living with HIV (UNAIDS 2010).

According to the statistics published by Statistics South Africa, in 2010, life expectancy was estimated at 53.3 years for males and 55.2 years for females. Statistics South Africa (2010:3) further reports that the infant mortality rate was estimated at 46.9 per 1 000 live births in 2010. Judging by these figures, an estimation of 1.6 million people aged 15 and older, and approximately 183 000 children, would be in need of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) in 2010. The total number of new HIV infections for 2010 was estimated at 410 000. Of these, an estimated 40 000 were children. There were 1.99 million HIV/AIDS orphans in South Africa in 2010 while new HIV infections among adults were estimated at 370 000 in the same year. According to the most recent UNAIDS estimates on HIV/AIDS, South Africa's total number of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) now stands at 5.6 million (UNAIDS 2010). Based on these figures, it is clear that HIV/AIDS infections are increasing rather than decreasing. This indicates that HIV/AIDS is a major social problem in South Africa.

There is still no vaccine or medication that can be used to cure this disease, besides informing the public to change its behaviour. Although there are some drugs, like ARVs, which are used to treat AIDS with consequences that suppress the spread of this epidemic; other measures still need to be applied. To achieve this, institutions such as governments, families, religious organisations, schools, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media can play vital role in curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Among these institutions, it is the view of this paper that the

media can play a crucial role in disseminating information and educating the public about this incurable disease. This means that the media needs to maintain constant coverage of HIV/AIDS and be proactive, as opposed to reactive, when reporting on the disease.

Reactive coverage of HIV/AIDS issues means that the media tends to focus on events and personalities rather than engage in a deliberate and concerted effort to generate its own news (Ajibola 2009:64). A proactive approach, on the other hand, means that the media needs to generate its own stories or news on HIV/AIDS issues and stop focusing on events and personalities. This can be achieved through writing features, editorials and articles which scrutinize government plans and set an agenda on this epidemic. Doing so will allow HIV/AIDS issues to remain on the media agenda and, as a result, the public will be aware of this disease and infection rates will consequently decline.

To minimize the spread of HIV/AIDS and its impact in society, the media is expected to act as conveyers of information to society. In support of this idea, Patel (2005) confirms that mass media is expected to play a leading role in stimulating rapid change and development in societies. This has to be across all institutions of society, including the economic, political and social institutions.

### **Language and the Issue of HIV/AIDS**

Language has strong influence on attitudes toward HIV/AIDS and people affected with HIV/AIDS. It can be damaging or it can be non-judgmental, positive, and constructive (IWMF 2006: 19). On the other hand, Irimu and Schwartz (n.d:14), point out that language determines the message passed to media audience and it determines whether the message is clear and understandable and the value it carries. The basic purpose of journalists is to communicate and inform society about different issues, therefore when fulfilling this, they have to consider the issue of language. Notwithstanding, the IFJ (2006:7) encourages journalists not to use complex epidemiological or medical terminology that their readers or audience will not understand. They should be precise without being overly complicated. Panos Institute (2008:3) reinforces that journalists should remember that the words they use can evoke strong emotions and reinforce stereotypes which drive discrimination against persons

infected and affected by HIV and other vulnerable groups. This means that media practitioners have to ensure that they use appropriate language that does not discriminate nor encourage hatred among society.

The appropriate use of language coverage of balanced, accurate, fair and informative news especially on social problems like HIV/AIDS encourage positive behavior among members of society. In relation to this point, Deacon et al. (2007: 115) state that "media language use is seen as embodying relations of power and authority in society and contributes to the ongoing production of social conceptions, values, identities and relations". This indicates that via the use of value-neutral language, media can play vital role in combating this epidemic as well as promoting unity among societies. This is why UNDP (2008: 59) recommends the following principles in relation to the use of language for reporting HIV/AIDS:

1. Language that is inclusive and that does not create or reinforce a 'them/us' mentality;
2. Vocabulary drawn from peace and human development rather than war;
3. Descriptive terms preferred by the persons themselves. For example, 'sex worker' or 'women in the sex trade' is preferred to 'prostitute'.
4. Language that is value neutral, gender sensitive and empowers rather than disempowers.

#### **Role of Journalists in Reporting HIV/AIDS**

It is germane to assess the role of journalists in reporting HIV/AIDS in this study due to their power of writing and reporting. Journalists, as media workers and members of a society affected by HIV/AIDS, should act as advocates in the war against this epidemic. Journalism has a three-fold role: to inform, educate and entertain (Cullen 2003:74). Based on these functions, journalists can play a major role in the fight against HIV/AIDS by covering and disseminating well researched, objective and accurate information surrounding this incurable disease. By so doing, journalists will be able to inform and educate people about the extent of the problem and ways of preventing infection.

HIV is a large-scale and disturbing social problem that needs proper strategies to combat it. In support of this idea, the International Federation

of Journalists (IFJ) (2006:10) posits that "HIV/AIDS pushes all the news buttons, it is a health emergency, it has a human face, it has elements of science, medicine, religion, and it has deep grief and moments of extreme joy". This denotes that HIV/AIDS generates news from different angles. With this view in mind, journalists should cover news on HIV/AIDS from different angles in order to inform and educate communities about the consequences of this epidemic. According to Irimu and Schwartz (n.d), the sole objective of journalism practice is to communicate; therefore they should underline the importance of using simple language devoid of jargon, clichés, vague terms and value-laden stereotypes when reporting this epidemic.

#### **Challenges of Covering HIV/AIDS**

The challenges of covering HIV/AIDS are varied and complex (Valentine 2006:12). Valentine notes that journalists need to understand the sometimes difficult science behind, for example, vaccine and microbicide trials in order to report them well. For instance, journalists should be in the right position to understand how antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) work in order to educate and inform people who live with HIV/AIDS on how to use them. However, journalists' lack of scientific interpretation of HIV/AIDS issues sometimes misleads the public because they rely on the media for their understanding of HIV/AIDS issues.

In such cases, journalists may face many barriers to good reporting, from government censorship to prejudice from their own media outlet. Despite these, organizational constraints and traditional news gathering practices can also act as a challenge to the coverage of HIV/AIDS issues. For instance, journalists could face a problem when trying to interview sources of information, due to the unavailability of resources. Wangulu (2007: 12) states that "covering the issue of HIV/AIDS requires a clear understanding of the challenges and limitations faced by journalists". Pertinent to this, Panos (2005: 4) outlines the following challenges which are faced by media workers in reporting HIV/AIDS:

1. Lack of access to accurate information about the epidemic.
2. Curbs on freedom of speech and oppressive government policies affecting access to information and freedom to scrutinize policies affecting HIV/AIDS.

3. Limited personal understanding about issues, trends and changing dynamics in the epidemic due to lack of training.
4. Lack of resources, including money, time and equipment, to travel and investigate HIV stories, leading to an over-emphasis on HIV in urban areas and neglect of rural populations.
5. Ethical dilemmas, such as the tension between the need to respect a person's confidentiality and the need to provide a platform for the voices of people affected by HIV/AIDS.
6. Self-censorship, as a response to cultural taboos, such as open discussion of sexual behavior or analysis of gender roles.
7. Competing topics on the news agenda and perceived AIDS fatigue by editors, as well as audiences, resulting in a lack of editorial support.
8. The need for new, imaginative approaches to creating AIDS stories and programmes appropriate to different media such as community radio.

In relation to the challenges of reporting on HIV/AIDS, it is apparent that covering HIV/AIDS stories is very challenging because reporters or journalists have to take different issues into consideration before they can publish their stories. Regardless of these challenges and limitations, journalists should make sure that they contribute to the fight against this epidemic. To strengthen this point, Cullen (2003:76) concurs that regardless of any limitations and difficulties in effecting behavioral change, the press is able to improve awareness, knowledge and understanding of the epidemic. In order to defeat these challenges, journalists should acquire adequate skills so that the issue of HIV/AIDS can be reported effectively.

### **Theoretical Framework: Agenda-setting**

This study is rooted within the broad theoretical framework of Agenda-setting. This theory is very important in that it allows the researcher to examine how the media sets the agenda for issues such as HIV/AIDS that are of great concern to society.

Agenda-setting is based on the idea that media form the public agenda through the amount of coverage devoted to a particular issues and events. An agenda is a list of current

events and public issues which are viewed in a hierarchy of importance at a particular point in time (Roger and Dearing 1988). Agenda setting is an effect theory that places the media in the powerful position of determining the salience of issues on the public agenda. Media achieves this through framing some aspects of perceived reality to enhance their salience in such a way as to promote a particular problem definitions, causal treatment, moral evaluation and or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993:53). This means that the attention that media puts on the issues or social problems such as HIV/AIDS helps the audience to understand the seriousness of such issues. The concept of framing suggests that the way an issue or problem is presented influences the choice people make. That is why Chong and Druckman (2007:109) point out that "framing in communication affects the attitudes and behaviours of audiences". This implies that the way journalists write or talk about HIV/AIDS can influence audiences either positively or negatively. Framing HIV/AIDS issues in the positive manner is one of the influential ways that media can adopt in order to shape public opinion. This can be achieved through the choice of good language because it is a vital tool of communication.

Brubaker (2008:2) states that "as media coverage increases, the issue's salience to the audience increases, and the items move higher in the public's agenda hierarchy". In support of this, Barren (1997) points out that the issues that receive prominent attention are the problems that the public views as the nation's most important. Agenda setting emphasises the media effect on the public. The media determines the important political issues and therefore, set the public's agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972). McCombs and Shaw (1972) further indicate that audiences learn both about given issues and how much importance to attach to the issues by the amount of information provided by media.

According to this theory, media does not mirror public opinion as much as they influence behaviour (Ader 1995). However, McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that the media influences issue salience among audience members through the amount of news coverage provided. This indicates that when media chooses issues and events to cover, the media shapes its audiences' reality. Giving social problems like HIV/AIDS more space and time in the media agenda will

help audience to regard such issues as a serious matter. It is in this direction that Willings and Macdowell (2000: 23) aver that “the strength of the mass media lies in helping to put issues on the public agenda, in reinforcing local efforts, in raising consciousness about issues and in conveying simple information”. Adesanya and Ibagere (1999) reaffirm the powerful influence of the media on the public when they state that “agenda setting implies that mass media predetermine what issues are important at a given time in a given society”. Lindsey (1994) argued that media plays a central role in mediating information and framing public opinion. Adding to this view, Omoera et al. (2010:2) indicate that “the media cast an eye on events that face us directly and render remote happenings observable and meaningful.

Essentially, the agenda setting function of the mass media refers to the ability of the news media to focus public attention on a few key ‘objects’ (Valenzuela and Correa 2009:207). According to Rogers et al. (1991), agenda setting theory suggests that factors such as the number of articles, news types and locations in the newspaper are important for putting a media agenda into the public. The suggestion of this theory for the coverage of social problems such as HIV/AIDS is that frequent coverage of such issues that concern wellbeing of society is necessary to place them high on public agenda especially among policy makers. Rogers and Dearing (1991) studied AIDS coverage in the United States and the results revealed an interaction between the agenda of mass media and the agenda of the science community. Thus, newspaper coverage of HIV/AIDS issues can provide information with which discussion of this epidemic can take place.

Rogers and Dearing (1991) further state that the agenda-setting theory can explain how the media emphasizes issues in the public’s cognition through the increasing intensity and persistence of media coverage and creating meanings for news events related to public issues. Tuchman (1978) adds that “media can construct reality in the eyes of its audiences through various framing techniques such as selection and emphasis of certain aspects of an issue”. Pratt et al. (2002) affirm that the implication of the agenda setting theory for the coverage of diseases in Africa is that heavy media coverage of such health problems is necessary to place them

high on the public agenda, especially among policy makers. Pratt et al. (2002) further point out that the framing techniques used by the media can affect the perceptions of the public and policy makers on those diseases. This indicates that a media agenda can serve as a yardstick on how certain issues are given attention by the public and how such issues affect them. For instance, if HIV/AIDS as a social problem receives more coverage from the media, this might change people’s perception and attitude towards this epidemic.

McCombs (cited in Valenzuela and Correa 2009:207), is of the view that since the seminal 1968 Chapel Hill study, by McCombs and Shaw (1972), more than 400 studies and experiments in the US and other countries have been able to produce evidence that there is a transfer of salience and ideas in agenda setting between the ‘objects’ prominent in the media agenda and those prominent in the public agenda. In succinct terms, these ‘objects’ are public issues and could be situated in the realm of politics, economy or the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This implies that the media agenda setting not only tells the public what to think about but also how to think about issues discussed by the media. The issue of HIV/AIDS in this regard is no exception as it is a social problem that affects the whole world and, therefore, should be prioritised in the media agenda.

Zucker (1978) argued that agenda setting effects could not take place everywhere, but the effects would depend on the degree of the issue’s obtrusiveness (cited in Lee 2010:761). To say that agenda setting effects are determined by obtrusiveness or nonobtrusiveness of issues is to say that certain issues are closer to the centre of the media agenda than others. For instance, HIV/AIDS issues need to be on the media agenda permanently as it affects everyone around the globe, even more so than conflicts which are often discussed in the parliament.

According to Rogers and Dearing (2007:85), the scholarly research on the agenda setting process of the mass media stems most directly from the writing of Cohen (1963), who observed that:

*The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and adoption. It may not be successful much of the time in telling what to think, but it is stunning successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it followed from this that the world looks different to different people depending not only on their per-*

*sonal interest, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers and editors, and publishers of the papers they read. The editor may believe he is only printing things that people want to read, but he is thereby putting a claim on their attention, powerfully determining what they will be thinking about, and talking about, until the next wave laps their shore* (quoted in Nel 2002:33).

Lee (2010) is of the view that agenda setting was able to explain the media effects such as telling people what to think, but also telling them how to think. This shows that the prominence that is given to certain issues, like HIV/AIDS, by the media agenda helps people consider such issues as important. McQuail (2000:426) adds that “the attention given to news coverage influences the rank order of public awareness and attributes to the significance of an issue”. This means that the attention that the media can give to social problems, like HIV/AIDS in South Africa, will promote awareness of this terrible disease and as result contribute to public agenda.

Giving issues such as HIV/AIDS more prominence in the media could help in informing and promoting awareness of this epidemic in the society. The use of different genres as well as decipherable headlines when reporting HIV/AIDS could also contribute to the awareness of HIV/AIDS issues in the media. Therefore the researcher believes that this theory is suitable for this study as it will help in finding out how media (especially press) cover and set agenda on HIV/AIDS issues.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Population

The study population for this study comprised of four daily South African newspapers, namely: *Daily Dispatch*, *Daily Sun*, *Sowetan* and *The Star* for a period of 12 months (January 2010 to December 2010). Out of these, 288 issues representing thirty percent of the total were analyzed for this study. A systematic method was adopted in the sampling of issues of each of the newspapers selected for the study. To realize this, each month was divided into four weeks leaving out weekends because the newspapers used in this study are published from Monday to Friday. For instance, the following weeks were selected for January 2010 (1<sup>st</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup>), (11<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup>), (18<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup>) and (25<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup>).

### Unit of Analysis

For this study, units of analysis consist of the following:

1. Hard news stories on HIV/AIDS issues.
2. All feature articles and editorials on HIV/AIDS.
3. All opinion and commentary articles on HIV/AIDS.
4. All letters to the editors, news in brief, with HIV/AIDS as a theme.

### Data Analysis

Data obtained from the issues of the newspapers studied were analyzed with the use of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis utilizes the researcher’s ability to analyze information from specialized language that belongs to a particular genre. That is why Ritchie and Lewis (2003: 200) argue that “discourse analysis is concerned with the way knowledge is produced within a particular discourse through the use of distinctive language (for example, legal discourse, medical discourse)”. Furthermore, Thorne (2000: 5) posits out that “discourse analysis capitalizes on inquiry into the language that is used and the way it is used to uncover the societal influences that underlie our behaviours and thoughts.” In relation to this, Slembrouck (2005: 1) points out that discourse analysis refers to attempts to study the organization of language above sentence or above the clause and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written text. Gee (2010) is of the view that discourse analysis has a social dimension and for many analysts, it is a method for studying how language “get recruited ‘on site’ to enact specific social activities and social identities”. This means that this approach will help in understanding how language has been used in these newspapers to disseminate and present HIV/AIDS information. The stories chosen for analysis were carefully studied and observations were made. From these observations, conclusions were made and these formed the basis of judgments for this study.

## FINDINGS

The objective of this study was answered based on the language usage of the newspapers in question. Stories selected for analysis were

carefully studied and observations were made concerning their use of value-neutral language or choice of words in dissemination of an HIV/AIDS message. As stated earlier, the main objective for this study is:

- i. To determine whether selected South African newspapers comply with guidelines proposed for language use in reporting HIV/AIDS issues or not.

The analyzed newspapers were found to be very generous in the use of appropriate words and value-neutral language. These newspapers avoided derogatory or discriminatory words when reporting on HIV/AIDS issues. The use of value-neutral language when reporting on HIV/AIDS issues is vital as this encourages people to change their behavior and to treat people living with HIV/AIDS with respect. This is supported by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) (2006) which stipulates that appropriate language is constructive and does not cause prejudice.

IWMF further points out that language has a strong influence on attitudes towards HIV/AIDS and people living with HIV/AIDS. The fact that the role of the media is to inform, educate and to entertain does not mean that it has to use words or language that discriminates against people living with HIV/AIDS. However, it sometimes happens that media unintentionally uses those words which create anxiety and discrimination amongst readers. The argument of this paper is that the use of derogatory language, when reporting on HIV/AIDS issues, should be downplayed and replaced with value-neutral language.

Previous studies found that media coverage of HIV/AIDS, in many parts of the world, was dominated by discriminating words and phrases such as 'innocent victims', 'catch AIDS', 'AIDS scourge' and 'plague.' It is surprising to reveal that newspapers sampled for this study do not have words such as these in their reports. This is a very positive response of media to the guidelines proposed for the use of appropriate language when reporting HIV/AIDS issues.

For instance, the article found on page 7 of *Sowetan*, 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2010, entitled 'Hope for those with HIV' is a good example of appropriate language usage. The language used in this article is simple and positive. The terms are also selected in order to show that there is hope for those living with HIV/AIDS. Apparently, the main

purpose of this article is to inform the readers of the strides that have been made in a bid to improve the lives of those living with HIV/AIDS. For instance, phrases such as 'HIV-positive', 'HIV infections' are used instead of 'HIV victim' or 'AIDS carrier'. These words, according to IFJ (2006), can cause distress or negative stereotypes.

However, the language used in this story, 'Hope for those with HIV', which was published by *Sowetan*, its tone gives the impression that this newspaper is carefully abiding by the guidelines proposed by interest groups, such as the IFJ, IWMF, UNESCO and UNDP in terms of using appropriate language when reporting this epidemic. Another article found on page 15 of *Sowetan*, 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2010, reads 'Prevention of HIV depends on us all'. Such a title has a way of bringing citizens together against HIV/AIDS which, in this case, has been presented as an enemy of all South Africans.

The use of the first person plural 'we' in this article is meant to represent South Africans as a collective. This has the effect of making people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) feel accepted rather than being stigmatized and isolated as social pariahs. However as the article progresses, the author moves away from collective nouns like 'we' and 'fellow citizens' to the second person 'you' to imply that communication is now directed at the reader as an individual rather than part of a collective.

The *Daily Dispatch* makes use of sensational language that may actually cause fear and dependency amongst those infected with HIV/AIDS. Insensitive words and phrases such as 'incorrect labels,' 'scrambling to recover' may actually invoke panic within people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). An article entitled 'people with HIV given wrong pills after mix-up' was found on page 1 of this newspaper and contains the above mentioned words and phrases. The *Daily Dispatch* also exploits stereotypes to convey its messages to the public. In this particular story, about the incorrect medication mistakenly given to HIV-positive persons, the identification of the suppliers of the incorrect medicine as Indian is not without connotations.

The newspaper also uses inflammatory language that may scare those infected with the disease, for example: 'the mix-up may lead to death of those involved.' In this particular story, 'people

with HIV given wrong pills after mix-up' technical jargon is also used. This is seen in the use of medical terms like 'dispense' 'batch' and 'administered'. This is probably an attempt to make the story credible since it is written by an expert reporter. The technical terms are often combined with simple words to ensure accessibility.

Compared to the *Sowetan*, the *Daily Dispatch* tends to be sensational and anti-establishment. Most of its stories deal with controversial issues. For example, in another article which was published on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2010, page 6, the headline reads: 'Health experts warn of mutant HIV strain.' Again, the phrase 'health experts' is rather ambiguous because it does not tell us who these health experts are. The allusion to a mutant strain of HIV is rather scary for people living with HIV/AIDS as they may feel threatened by this newly discovered strain. While one may be duped to think that the reporter has consulted the relevant people, 'health experts' is a collective noun that does not refer to any specific individual. The subheading, in small case, is also highly sensational: 'It's a time bomb that could be even more deadly.' The choice of the words 'time bomb' and 'deadly' is not innocent; it serves to emphasize the magnitude of the problem at hand.

The use of figurative language, as in 'young South Africans seem to be drowning in a high infection rate', is both scary and sensational. The word 'drowning' is usually associated with sinking in water but here it is being used figuratively to portray the manner in which young people are sinking in the disease. Institutions of higher learning are described as 'brothels' while lecturers are characterized as 'sex crazy perverts.' These terms are offensive but the intention of the article is to condemn the increasingly wayward behavior of individuals in institutions of higher learning.

The *Daily Sun* is also sensational in its diction. The use of screaming action words like 'beware' and adjectival phrases like 'very disturbing' and 'this is frightening' raise alarm and amplify the seriousness of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in higher institutions of learning. For instance, the word 'frightening' can be seen as sensational because it connotes that HIV/AIDS is likely to destroy South Africans.

The newspapers analyzed in this study were found to comply with the IFJ (2006), IWFMF (2006)

and UNICEF (2006) media guide in reporting HIV/AIDS issues to such an extent that reports on HIV/AIDS were found to be accurate, fair and balanced as suggested by the media guide. Journalists used language or terminology appropriately and provided explanations where necessary, so as to able readers to grasp the meaning of the message. It is the aim of the media guide to encourage journalists and other media workers to use acceptable language and report on HIV/AIDS issues as accurately as possible, so as to reduce the harm caused to those who are affected by this disease.

However, there are other words which can cause harm but are not suggested in this media guide; therefore, journalists have to be very careful when they report on this epidemic. For instance, words or phrases such as 'disease with no cure'; 'died of AIDS' and 'suspected of having HIV' need not be used when reporting HIV/AIDS. Journalists should make sure that they avoid such terms. Avoiding the use of language that does not perpetuate stigma and discrimination will help affected people disclose their status; it will also encourage those who do not know their status to go for testing.

## DISCUSSION

The results revealed that, indeed, the selected South African newspapers comply with the guidelines proposed by IFJ (2006), IWFMF (2006), UNICEF (2006) which are concerned with the way in which HIV/AIDS issues are portrayed in the media. Articles from these newspapers were found to be generally balanced and sensitive. It is also observed that the language used in these newspapers and the tone set in the stories was positive and encouraging. However, there are some articles which still use derogatory language, including terms like "HIV/AIDS victims" and "safe sex". The results are similar to what the study of Ajibola (2009) has revealed. Her study revealed that some metaphors containing negative connotations are still used. She further points out that this could create further stigma and discrimination for people living with this disease. To counteract this, journalists should make sure that they eliminate the use of words which cause harm to other parts of society.

The use of value-neutral language in reporting HIV/AIDS can be a useful tool for encourag-



ing positive behavioural change within society. In contrast, language can be manipulated for particular purposes; therefore journalists should take care not to place too much emphasis on the effects of the epidemic and they should also pay serious attention to HIV/AIDS sensitive language. In addition to this, De Wet (2004) emphasizes that language, terms and terminology could be used to reduce the level of stigma in HIV/AIDS reporting. This shows that language is a productive tool that can be used to instill positive behaviour amongst the public.

Each newspaper's agenda tends to influence the overall meaning of the stories it publishes. In their study, Krishnan et al. (1997) pointed out that media need to serve as reinforcers, as agenda setters as well as gatekeepers, in the coverage and dissemination of HIV/AIDS information in the African American community. It is also apparent, however, that these newspapers have a specific agenda infused and embedded in the HIV/AIDS stories they covered. The general impression is that HIV/AIDS is seen as a disturbing social problem in South Africa. Therefore, these newspapers need to do better to tell people about this epidemic.

The effectiveness of HIV/AIDS reporting depends on journalists' attitudes and values in relation to this disease. This means that journalists should carefully sensitise themselves against the prejudices and discriminatory attitudes found in statements and messages from many of their sources. By so doing, they are more likely to use appropriate language in their reports.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it is noted that:

- The newspapers in question used acceptable language when reporting HIV/AIDS issues. Even though there are some derogative words found in some reports.
- The language used in these newspapers was positive and encouraging.
- The use of value-neutral language in reporting HIV/AIDS can be a useful tool for encouraging positive behavioural change within society.
- Journalists understand the value of using value-neutral language for reporting HIV/AIDS issues.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into consideration the important issues that the study delved into, the researcher identified some points for consideration in order to improve the coverage of HIV/AIDS issues. The researcher recommends that:

- Media should not engage in sensational reporting as this tends to create fear, hatred, rejection and despondency among people living with HIV/AIDS.
- Insensitive words and phrases such as 'AIDS victims,' 'HIV Patient' or 'AIDS suffers' may actually invoke panic within people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), therefore journalists should avoid using them.
- Whenever technical terms are used, they should be combined with simple words to ensure accessibility.
- Avoiding the use of language that does not perpetuate stigma and discrimination will help affected people disclose their status; it will also encourage those who do not know their status to go for testing.

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