

Yesterday's News, HIV And The Print Media: A Personal Reflection
By Dipankar De Sarkar

LONDON (PANOS FEATURES) – There's a story told of a veteran Canadian newspaper editor, who, after putting the paper to bed, would gather his editors round in the newsroom. "All right, boys and girls," he would say. "What really happened in the world today?"

This is not an apocryphal tale (it happens to be true). For what really happened out there – as opposed to what we are told happened or what we are conditioned to discard among the things that happened – has always been a key question for the media. It's one that all of us in the media should strive to answer every day of our lives.

Of course we don't know everything that happened – who could – but we do know of one story that broke in the last 24 hours. Just over 8,000 people died of AIDS, the overwhelming majority of them in the developing world.

Few of those who died would have had access to any of the exotic anti-retroviral drugs that have made HIV/AIDS such a manageable condition in the wealthy countries of the West. They would have died miserable deaths, many in countries where the majority live on incomes of less than a dollar a day – without a decent meal or clean water.

UNAIDS calls it a "the development and security issue of our time", but few in the media bother to project the voices of those who are poor or live with AIDS.

It is not without reason that the media are often accused of being insensitive to the many tragic crises unfolding around us. But our defence (readers don't want to know about what really happened out there – they want sunshine news instead) is weak, duplicitous and smacks of arrogance.

Yet the fact remains that it is precisely this increasingly advertisement-driven and commercialised media that must also play a crucial role if global attempts to defeat AIDS are to succeed. It has to do this by calm reflection, provocative analysis and – perhaps the need of the hour – bold investigation.

It must help change risky sexual behaviour by reporting from towns and villages; confront and challenge national governments and international donor agencies by questioning their policies, priorities and methodologies; and investigate where we are being remiss in our battle against the disease, always keeping in mind those who are voiceless, poor and marginalised – those, in other words, who are most likely to die of AIDS.

As things stand, the media is full of instances that reveal all manners of biases, lack of information – lack of empathy even – in the day-to-day reporting of AIDS.

Here's an example from the first week of July, taken from a West African newspaper accessed randomly on the internet.

Reporting on a recent finding that women are more likely to be infected with HIV than men in a particular post-civil war society, the report says: “Even women in their prime resort to promiscuity.” Beaches are “infested with girls in the sex trade.” Anonymous girls are quoted as saying: “wan man nor dei fullop box (one man cannot afford to get a woman’s box full)”, before concluding: “In their precipitation to get the man who can afford to fill their boxes, they risk contracting the Human Immuno Deficiency Virus (HIV).”

There is not one mention of poverty, of the status of women, or of the role of men behind the grim statistics. Remarkably, the article actually blames women for the fact that they are more prone to contracting HIV than men (although there is a passing mention of rape, “playboy life” and – wait for it – women being made “sex slaves”).

There are many instances of similar media excesses elsewhere in the world. In the Western media not very many years ago, AIDS was portrayed as a ‘gay plague’ and homophobia was common, and its legacy continues till this day. Denial of the disease continues to characterise much of the Indian press reporting.

Over two decades on from the discovery of the AIDS virus, however, there is another kind of bias creeping into parts of the media, in the backdrop of a general sobering down of tone – the result perhaps of media sensitisation work carried out in recent years.

Much of the media coverage of AIDS these days is about what governments, donors and UN agencies say and do, with an overarching emphasis on aid dollars. Dull, crammed with figures, reading like press releases drafted by some faceless AIDS bureaucrat, these stories can range from a visiting Western minister talking about HIV to bilateral aid agreements with a wealthy donor nation to the launch of a new report on AIDS by an international agency.

Almost always, there will be one notable absentee in these stories. It is that old familiar: the voices of the poor and those living with AIDS. But no one seems to mind. Pharmaceutical companies, donor agencies, governments, even well-meaning NGOs appear to be quite content so long as their names and agendas appear in print.

What does all of this mean for those in the media who want to break the mould? Just that we must try even harder to ‘own’ our stories. A print media with deeper roots among local communities, journalists who do not shy away from investigating issues, and editors of national dailies who encourage better reporting on AIDS can all help make a dent.

It is ultimately a professional challenge to report what really happened. Here’s some more news from yesterday: Nearly 14,000 people became infected with HIV; some 1,400 women died in childbirth (thousands more became disabled); more than 5,000 people died of tuberculosis and a similar number of children from diarrhoeal diseases; and 800 million people remained chronically undernourished.

Let’s try and get the faces behind the figures.