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Assessment Of Print Media Coverage Of AIDS

By

Dana Batnag
Assessment of Print Media Coverage of AIDS as an Issue
paper presented by Dana Batnag during the Seminar on Mass Media and AIDS in Southeast Asia
August 17-19, 1994

METHODOLOGY

Persons interviewed:

1. Health Secretary Juan Flavier
2. Ricky Hernandez, former chief of the DOH AIDS unit
3. Peter Resureccion, Reach Out Foundation
4. Maan Balquiedra, Remedios AIDS Foundation
5. Michael Tan, Health Action Information Network
6. Marilu Crisostomo, public information office, World Health Organization for the Asia-Pacific
7. Rowena Alvarez, Institute for Social Studies and Action (ISSA)
8. Margareth Anosan, ISSA
9. Malou Mangahas, Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ)
10. Jun Engracia, news editor, Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)
11. Joey Nolasco, managing editor, PDI
12. Diane Mendoza, health beat reporter, Today
13. Margie Holmes, psychiatrist and Manila Times columnist

Files reviewed:
DOH clippings of printed stories, letters to the editors and columns on March, April and June 1993
Bulletin files from 1991-'93
Bulletin stories from 1983-1986
Inquirer clippings

The question I wanted answered was, "Is Philippine media's coverage of AIDS as an issue objective?" And, corollary to this, "How can it be improved?"

Bulletin and Inquirer were chosen because they were the two most widely-circulated papers in the Philippines. The tabloids I chose to ignore, because in the Philippines everyone agrees, even reporters among themselves, that the tabloids always sensationalize their stories to sell more copies. In journalistic jargon we call it "salsal." It's actually a Tagalog word for male masturbation, but among reporters it has come to mean making a story seem bigger than it really is.

Bulletin at least is known for being dour, and Inquirer makes a pitch for accurate reporting. Also, Bulletin has the best library among all the newspaper
companies.

A cursory review of the stories on file with the Department of Health shows that of 42 stories, letters to the editor and columns that came out in the papers in April last year, only one mentioned the four ways through which AIDS can be transmitted - blood, sex and needles, and from infected mother to child.

Yet there were stories that described how the virus works, and how it is not passed on -- by kissing, or hugging; or touching. One column on AIDS mentioned only sex as a mode of transmission; another, about Filipino homosexuals in San Francisco, USA, was complete with statistics but forgot to include how AIDS is contracted. It only mentioned that AIDS is also a problem among gays in the Philippines.

Nine were about the latest statistics on AIDS, six about government and NGO programs -- a library on AIDS, World AIDS Day, and the formation of a task force on AIDS; eight were "scientific stories" -- drugs and AIDS, mainly, and the continued search for the elusive AIDS cure. Nineteen were about the controversies that dog AIDS in the Philippines: condom use, sex education, prostitution, and the recurring bright idea that government make AIDS testing mandatory for certain high-risk groups.

In June last year, 12 of the 73 stories that came out in the print media mentioned the most common modes of transmission. An additional seven mentioned only sex and blood, or blood and needles. Twenty-two of the stories were about the controversies on AIDS, 16 about the latest statistics, nine about PWAs (persons with AIDS; of these, six were about Dolzura Cortez, the first PWA to come out in the Philippines; of the six stories, five were about a movie on her); six stories were about the modes of transmission; 12 were "science stories" on drugs and the latest scientific discoveries on AIDS.

Of sixty-one stories and columns on file at the Inquirer library, published between 1992 to 1994, only six mentioned the ways through which AIDS can be transmitted. One story, about an anti-AIDS drive in Davao City, mentioned that the organizers support the use of latex condoms because laboratory studies show that sperm cannot pass through the condoms. It did not mention, however, how AIDS is transmitted.

Another, which came out in January last year, predicted that more than a million people would have AIDS by the year 2000. The story said saliva is not excluded as a mode of transmission. It did not include the other modes of transmission.
AIDS awareness among Filipinos, according to Health Secretary Juan Flavier, is at a high 92 percent. "But education is lagging behind."

Media coverage on AIDS, he says, is "mixed. It depends on the newspapers."

Three years ago the Institute for Social Studies and Action (ISSA), a non-government organization (NGO) concerned with women's reproductive health, did a pilot study among 60 seamen and their wives.

"The Department of Health (DOH) has placed overseas contract workers as their third priority target group for AIDS education efforts because they have been known to exhibit high-risk behaviors based on the recognized routes of transmission of the AIDS virus," says Rowena Alvarez of ISSA.

The study covered three groups in Batangas, a province 96 kilometers south of Metro Manila; La Union, about 250 kilometers north of Metro Manila; and in Metro Manila.

"About half of the Metro Manila women in the study knew about AIDS being sexually transmitted, but they weren't clear about the needles [as a mode of transmission]," says Alvarez. "The Batangas women only knew that AIDS is a disease, and that it kills. They didn't know what kind of disease it is, or how they can avoid getting it."

Because most of the stories in the Philippine press focus on condoms, sex and AIDS, most people still think of it as a sexually-transmitted disease. In a society where sex is still a taboo subject and sex education a hotly-contested issue, this places an even greater stigma on AIDS and PWAs.

"Sex kasi nang sex, kaya nagkaka-AIDS [They got AIDS because they indulged in sex]," Alvarez has heard some people say.

"It's not just what you say, it's also what you don't say," says Margarita Holmes, a clinical psychologist who's also a Manila Times columnist.

She points out that the stories of the four PWAs who have come out so far give the message that PWAs are mainly women, and that AIDS is usually contracted through sex with foreigners. The four PWAs are all women, and two of them got AIDS from a foreign husband. The fourth, Sarah Jane, is a sex worker.

"The news focus on women as carriers; it leaves out the responsibility of men in transmitting the infection," says Alvarez. If a man and a woman were to make love with infected partners, the woman is more likely to get AIDS than the man, says Alvarez. It's the man who does the pummeling, after all, and the vaginal lining is more likely to tear than the penis.

"Men may be infecting most women," says Alvarez. "But what messages come out? Dolzura [Cortes, the first PWA to publicly admit it], promiscuity. Rachel [Reyes, another PWA], sex with foreigners; Sarah Jane was a sex worker."

Dolzura got married at the age of 14, and had several husbands. Rachel was married to a Japanese, who also turned out to be HIV positive.

"My fear is that by focusing on Sarah Jane, for instance, it only reinforces the
idea that sex workers [are the main carriers], and it reinforces the anti-women idea. It's always a female face," says Michael Tan of the Health Action Information Network (HAIN). "I know of several gay men who have HIVs, but my fear also is that if they come out, people will say, 'Bakla lang iyon,' [That's because they're homosexuals].

"The media focuses on personalities. Like, being Sarah Jane doesn't do anything, it only makes people aware, it doesn't educate them. Unfortunately, that seems to be one of the trends right now."

"The coming out of [PWAs] was sensationalized," says Maan Balquiedra of the Remedios AIDS Foundation. "Especially of Sarah Jane; her pictures were splashed all over the tabloids; it could have been done in a more objective way."

The story of Sarah Jane only served to "stigmatize sex workers more," says Balquiedra. "People will think it's an infection of women."

The Remedios Foundation monitors six Philippine broadsheets every day. It also has an AIDS hotline, where people can phone in and ask questions about AIDS.

In comparison with the tabloids, Balquiedra says the broadsheets "try to be more objective, and they're successful, to some degree."

"The problem is that readers are not given enough information, in case they want to find out more about AIDS, or if they want to do something about. After reading the article, that's it," says Balquiedra.

She also deplores the print media's choice of words in writing about AIDS and PWAs. "It's always 'fatal,' and 'dreaded,' when there are so many adjectives in the dictionary. It's very basic, like it's not an AIDS test, it's an HIV-anti-body test. It's not an HIV virus, it's HIV. There's no education involved."

"Okay, people would easily understand, but they're not understanding the right things."

Balquiedra's examples are actually the more usual and "harmless" ones. One story, published in the Manila Chronicle in June last year, said the DOH estimates that a "mindboggling 100 others go unreported, spreading their seeds of death" per every HIV case documented.

Based on the questions callers are asking their hotline numbers, Balquiedra says the public's level of knowledge and education about AIDS is "still very low. We should be on prevention, but they're still asking about modes of transmission, and signs and symptoms of AIDS, and anti-body testing."

Yet in a way the Filipino public's level of awareness has improved. Balquiedra says that in 1991, when the hotline was put up, the callers wanted to know what AIDS was all about. "It was more on HIV/AIDS definition."

"The people are not educated because the stories are all of one kind," says Holmes. They revolve on the latest statistics on AIDS, on the PWAs, and on the controversies surrounding the government and NGOs' AIDS awareness campaigns: mainly condom use and sex education.

"[Coverage] is mainly sensationalized; it dwells on the myths, and on the
negative side of the disease," says Peter Resureccion of Reach Out Foundation, another non-government organization involved in AIDS awareness programs and counseling.

"In terms of contents coverage has moved from the myths about AIDS to the methods of transmission to the impact, to who are infected," says Ricky Hernandez, former chief of the DOH AIDS unit. "AIDS stories are more or less the same from country to country -- about rejection, isolation, and society's reaction to the [PWAs]. The focus is still on groups of people, not on the individuals, their sexual practices."

Philippine press, because of the social taboo on sex and the Church's refusal to admit it exists outside the marital bedroom, still "relates to the topic at an arm's length, it avoids talking about certain things."

"As of now AIDS is usually seen as being passed through sex," says Malou Mangahas of the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ). "The messages are simplistic, just use condoms." The other facets of AIDS, such as the other modes of transmission, are not as written about. "It's seen more as a health issue, first, and only second as a social issue."

Yet AIDS is a social issue, especially in the Philippines, where sexual ignorance is actually seen as a virtue.

Most blood banks in the Philippines still do not screen their blood for HIV. During a forum on sexual education, it was mentioned that one government hospital wanted to test for HIV and actually bought their own equipment, only to be told that they couldn't because their medical technologists weren't capable enough. Overseas contract workers engage in sex abroad and then bring home to their wives sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including AIDS, along with the dollars. Some government hospitals, lacking funds, reuse their needles. Even medical personnel are not that well-educated about AIDS. Every now and then a story comes out about PWAs who died without medical attention because their doctors refused to treat them, and the HIV positives have their own stories about nurses and doctors who refused to touch them.

Given this situation, the hypocrisy on sex and matters relating to it, the reluctance to use condoms, the lack of HIV tests for blood products, and the ignorance about AIDS itself, AIDS is a disaster waiting to happen.

"The conditions [favorable for its spread] are there," said Michael Tan of the Health Action Information Network (HAIN) during a forum on sexual education. "Maybe, in this case, simply reporting the facts is not enough."

But media has its limitations.

"I guess the priority will always be selling the paper," says Ricky Hernandez. "Any advocacy for media to play a more responsible role will need to adjust to the bigger agenda, so you must feed them with stories that can help sell the paper."

As such the press will pick up only the stories that sell, and as far as the public
is concerned, what they want to know about AIDS are the statistics and the persons afflicted.

"The challenge [for DOH and the NGOs] is to make AIDS education interesting enough; like human interest stories always see print, because they fall within the agenda," adds Hernandez. He believes the responsibility to educate the public falls mainly on the AIDS advocates. "I don't expect media to create new approaches, but if you give them enough good stories, they'll use them."

It's an observation shared by other NGOs, this thinking that one, media will pick up only the stories that sell and two, media is only as good as the stories given them.

"No one bothers to do [educational stories on AIDS, like, what is a virus], because I think media thinks that it doesn't sell," says Tan. "They never tried [to ask NGOs about their work], and I have to admit we NGOs have never tried to really reach out to media. [Although a few are] very good in publicity, they create things for the media."

Editors and reporters see things a little bit differently. For them, the limitations are mainly space and the story's news value.

"Editors are more exposed to AIDS as an issue," says Jun Engracia, Philippine Daily Inquirer's (PDI) news editor. They're actually sympathetic to it. Joey Nolasco, the managing editor, says they "give it good play because it's a danger to society."

Still, their evaluation of any AIDS stories their reporters submit have to pass two tests: what is the impact on the public, and the prominence of the person involved. Asked if they would print a story about a common housewife who happens to be a PWA, Engracia says it would be on a "case-to-case basis."

The Philippine print media's coverage on AIDS, Engracia says, is "not sensational."

Actually it's "very subdued," says Joey Nolasco, PDI's managing editor.

"Given the extent of the AIDS problem, you can't be sensational enough. You can never play it up in proportion to the enormity of the problem," says Engracia. "It's so serious, [but] government and society are not doing enough to contain it. The efforts made are not enough to measure up to the problem."

Still, Engracia says the print media has warned the public enough about the problem of AIDS. But he'd like to make Dolzura Cortez, the first PWA to come out, a "household byword."

He admits media has "not done enough to educate the people about AIDS." But then he points out that media in general "does not have that intention. They want to present it as news." The thrust is more to inform, not to educate.

As editors, their first priority is to make the story readable.

Engracia says they don't consciously edit out that one-paragraph description of the most common modes of AIDS transmission. Whether that information comes out or not depends on space limitations.

Sometimes it also depends on the writer. Some reporters conscientiously write
that information in on every story they do; others forget, or think that having written about it for the umpteenth time, the public would know, after all this time, how AIDS is transmitted.

It is true that reporters are not looking hard for other stories on AIDS, other than the statistics provided by the health department, the occasional PWAs willing to be identified, and the never-ending controversy on mandatory AIDS testing, sex education, and the use of condoms.

But they have their limitations, too. Reporters assigned to the health beat have a variety of other stories to cover, and they’re usually assigned to other related beats as well, like social welfare and the Church, when it quarrels with the DOH.

Pack reporting in the Philippines has become a practice, too. A reporter is expected to get all the other news the other papers got, and then her/his own scoop. What happens is that the reporters often end up dovetailing each other, making sure no one gets a scoop.

In the case of AIDS, few PWAs, other than those who have come out, want to be interviewed. Tan admits the NGOs are wary the press may bring in unwanted publicity. Families of PWAs are even more unwilling to talk to the press. The un-stereotypical cases, those who got AIDS from blood transfusions and the males, for example, are yet to come out.

For others it’s just a question of time.

Diane Mendoza of Today has been working on a story of how AIDS affects women and the status of women, but it’s taking her a long time because she has to do it while also covering her beat.

She says she’d also like to do a story on the transmission of AIDS, detailing how it happens in layman’s terms. She’d like to write about how the high-risk groups feel about government’s focus on them. "But there are not enough materials, and not enough interviewees."

Engracia says he’d like to see a story written by a PWA. He thinks that while the story on Dolzura (an Inquirer scoop, she came out in response to columnist Ceres Doyo’s call for PWAs to come out to give AIDS a face) was exhaustive, it wasn’t exhaustive enough. "We want people to see how hard and painful it really is to get AIDS."

He admits: "There has been no conscious effort to exhaust all aspects of AIDS."


Malou Mangahas of CIJ says she’d like to see a story about AIDS and children, and about the transmission of the disease itself. Tan suggests a story about the lack of sex education among sex workers. "The very innotative ways in which sex workers are being trained, just explaining what the virus is. They don’t know there’s such a thing as ovulation." Tan remembers some of them tittering: "Ay, nangingitlog pala kami [We didn’t know we lay eggs]."

There can be a light story on sexual practices. "One beauty parlor attendant, when asked what lubricants they use, said, ‘dinurog na dahon ng gumamela
"[pulped leaves]," says Tan. Male sex workers, he adds, hates using condoms because the penis, normally hot during sex, becomes swollen if it stays too long inside the condom. "They say it hurts."

Balquiedra suggests a story about "AIDS profiteering." There's a lot of money in AIDS work, she says, and "not everyone has the best intentions; a lot people are making money." She wants more stories on government and NGO programs on AIDS/HIV.

Holmes would like to see a story on how a Filipino family copes with the virus, a story that would show the gamut of relationships within the family and how AIDS either strengthens or weakens the bond that holds the family together.

"We've always prided ourselves on having a strong family unit, because there's no divorce here. But if it's strong only if the family members behave, then it's not very strong, is it?" She also suggests a story on the counsellors and caregivers of PWAs.

Flavier says he'd like to see a story on how AIDS is transmitted.

In Manila there is a 20-bed AIDS ward in a government hospital, aside from the one in San Lazaro hospital, which is directly under the DOH. The Ospital ng Maynila's AIDS ward has been written about only thrice: first when it was opened, second when a journalist visited it and wrote, briefly, about the ward and its patients. The third time was when Manila Mayor Alfredo Lim announced that part of the proceeds of the local filmfest will go for the upkeep of the ward.

To sum: AIDS has always enjoyed good play in the Philippine press, though most of the stories were more about the statistics of AIDS and the controversies that dog it, than about the disease itself. Few of the stories mentioned the most common modes of transmission. Even fewer really tried to educate the public about the disease.

Most NGOs feel the coverage is, in general, sensationalized. Health Secretary Flavier says it's "mixed," depending on the newspaper involved.

Media is limited by space and time and lack of interviewees, but these are not good enough reasons for not coming out with interesting, educational stories on AIDS. Time and interviewees a good reporter can always find, and space the editors will give if the story is interesting enough.

In the Philippines AIDS has become synonymous to sex, and has thus become a sort of moral taboo. The Catholic Church is against any AIDS awareness program that promotes condom use, which hampers the DOH's awareness drive. The Church's insistence that sex be limited to the marital bed in effect condemns people who do engage in it, either outside of or before marriage, and AIDS acquired in this way becomes a badge of shame.

Because of the emphasis on sex as a mode of transmission, most people forget or are not aware that there are other, non-sexual ways through which AIDS can be acquired. Thus any PWA becomes suspect of sexual promiscuity.

There is a high level of awareness about AIDS, but few Filipinos are now educated enough to dare touch those who have AIDS. Even those who know it
cannot be transmitted by sharing glasses refuse to share a drink with a PWA. Even doctors refuse to treat patients with HIV.

Given this situation, simply reporting the facts about AIDS is not enough. A writer must always try to contextualize, and to educate. For AIDS is an incurable disease, and our best bet against it is prevention. And our best tool, education.