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How journalists view their role in HIV and AIDS reporting in a new South Africa

Mokoena, Miriam

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1: INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

HIV and AIDS was a major challenge for the new South Africa, and media coverage of the pandemic has over the years come under scrutiny — with critics (Schneider, 1998; Stein, 2001; Stein, 2002; Siyamkela, 2003 and Finlay, 2004) claiming the topic was not well covered except as sensation. This project seeks to understand how journalists view the way they covered HIV and AIDS and what they think their role was in covering the pandemic. It looks at the coverage of HIV and AIDS from journalists' perspective. The introduction will provide background to the pandemic; discuss the government's response to HIV and AIDS and point out the challenges the media faced in the new South Africa.

I.1) The importance of HIV and AIDS research

The new democratic government headed by the ANC took over from the oppressive regime at a time when HIV was just starting to spread more extensively. According to the website of HIV and AIDS organisation Avert (2009) HIV was first diagnosed in South Africa in 1982 in two white homosexual men. About five years later, the first black person was diagnosed with an AIDS related illness. Because of its link to homosexuality, "the homophobic Apartheid government which was in power at that time disregarded the crisis and ignored the issue" (Harber, Palitza, Ridgard & Struthers, 2010, p. XI). According to Schneider (1998) in the year 1990 South Africa had an HIV prevalence rate of 0.8% and the figure went up to 1.5% the following year. At that time, there was less awareness and understanding of the disease with claims that "the virus was developed in a laboratory, with others suggesting it was spread by police teargas or through the deliberate infection of black sex workers by ex-ANC collaborators" (http://www.avert.org/history-aids-south-africa.htm). The growing pandemic was blamed on politics and race (Palitza *et al.*, 2010). This means that besides the problem affecting human life, there was lack of understanding on it from both the previous

government and the ‘new’ government. Considering that the media is often imbued with the responsibility to inform (Siebert et al., 1956), it was the media’s role then to inform their readers who were at risk and the government to take the issue seriously. This research looks at whether or not journalists feel they managed to live up to this responsibility and how they think they did this.

By 1997 16% of pregnant women attending public antenatal clinics were HIV positive (Schneider, 1998). Due to its rigid and unwavering tendency to report government flaws, the media by 1997 was viewed as hostile to the transformation agenda by the new government. The lack of trust in the media created misunderstanding and according to Finlay (2004) resulted in HIV and AIDS being told through controversies and scandals, and not through the voices of those affected and through what critics call the ‘real’ HIV issues. This research tries to establish whether or not the HIV and AIDS story was only covered through controversies and scandals. It brings in the voices of journalists who reported on HIV and AIDS to close a gap left by previous researchers on the subject. This is achieved by interviewing journalists who solely covered the health and science aspects of HIV and AIDS in the new South Africa. This also helps to bring to light how the media defined HIV and AIDS reporting or an HIV and AIDS story.

HIV is one of the issues that continued to haunt South Africa and the African continent as a whole. According to UNAIDS (2009) an estimated 5.6 million people were living with HIV in South Africa in 2009. An estimated 310 000 people are believed to have died of AIDS the same year. According the Avert website “Almost one in every three women aged 25 to 29 and over a quarter of men aged between 30 and 34 were living with HIV” (www.avert.org/aidssouthafrica.htm). The pandemic also affects children. According to UNAIDS (2009) there was an estimated 330000 children below the age of fifteen living with

HIV in 2009. “Only 30% of male youth (aged between 15 – 24 years) and 27% of females of the same age group can correctly identify ways to prevent sexual transmission and reject major misconceptions about HIV transmissions” (www.unaids.org/ctysa/AFRZAF_en.pdf). These facts automatically put HIV and AIDS in the public interest and make the issue worth researching. This study will be examining the ways in which HIV and AIDS was covered by reporters within the 1996-1999 period with greater focus to the Virodene saga which unfolded in the year 1997. This particular case study is chosen for the peculiar and serious ways it seemed to tarnish the reputation of the new government.

1.2) How the democratic transition brought challenges for the media

HIV and AIDS also broke at a time when the media underwent significant changes. Whereas the media was under strict control during the Apartheid era, the new constitution provided for the freedom of expression “which include freedom of the press and other media” (Bill of rights section 16 of chapter 2). During the Apartheid era, the media operated under very harsh conditions. Journalists were imprisoned, tortured and harassed (Pollak 1981). Anti-press laws made it difficult for the media to play their role of informing the people (Pollak, 1981). Freedom of expression was at the mercy of the Apartheid regime. For example, the Minister of Justice could ban people whose political views were considered not to be in the “best interest of the state” (Pollak, 1981, p. 49), without giving any reasons. Publishing anything said by a banned person could lead to imprisonment. Anti-press laws like The Official Secrets Act of 1956 and the Defence Amendment Act of 1967 made it difficult for the media to play the watchdog role. The Official Secret Act prohibited communication of matters of national security. According to Pollak (1981) this meant anything that government felt should be kept from the people.

Despite all this, the alternative press, which came to be in the 1980s, was able to oppose the Apartheid regime and its repressive laws. The newspapers were funded by sympathetic sources oversees and managed to counter the Apartheid regime's propaganda campaigns (Berger 2004). These newspapers included the *Grassroots* in Cape Town, *Weekly Mail*, *New Nation* and *Vrye Weekblad, South*. According to Berger (2004) the newspapers resisted censorship and exposed the government's evil acts like the death squads. They also supported liberation movements like the ANC. The alternative press would sometimes publish blank pages to demonstrate against censorship (Berger, 2004). The resistance by the alternative media paved a way for a change in media policy in South Africa. Things began to change for the better in the early 1990s with the holding of conferences that "brought international experience and gave substance to early outlines of progressive media policy" (Hadland, 2007, p. 97). These conferences include the Rhodes University Media Policy Workshop (1990), Jabulani Freedom of Airwaves Conference held in Amsterdam (1991), the University of Bophuthatswana Media Policy Workshop (1991) and the Patriotic Front Conference held in Durban in 1991. In November of 1991 the ANC and its Department of Information and Publicity held a seminar where the party circulated its media charter—based on debates from the conferences. The charter had a clause that catered for freedom of information and called for the democratisation of the media in South Africa (Hadland, 2007). The charter was adopted by the ANC's top decision making body, the National Executive Committee in 1992. A formal proposal was drawn up at the Free, Fair and Open Media Conference held in Cape Town in 1992. The proposal was presented at the convention of a democratic South Africa-multiparty political negotiation in Kempton Park in 1993 (Hadland, 2011). This laid a foundation for the freedom of the media which was later enshrined in the national constitution of the new democratic South Africa.

The freedom of expression provided by the constitution in the new South Africa, therefore, meant that more was expected from the media in terms of its monitorial or watchdog role. Unlike before, where the laws made it difficult for the media to freely play this role, the media was now operating in a free environment and expectations were high for the media to guard against the government's shortcomings and inform the public, thereby, holding government accountable to the people who voted it into power. According to Harber (2004) the new democracy brought some challenges of its own to the media; "one wants them (new democracies) to work and therefore one is seeking to define not just what constitutes high quality and interesting journalism but also how one can best contribute to helping democracy take root" (Harber, 2004, p. 79).

Issues like the high crime rate and corruption which had their roots in the Apartheid era (Harber, 2004) presented a challenge to journalists in the new South Africa. Harber (2004) argues that trying to cover these issues while at the same time trying to give the new government a chance to prove itself capable was not easy. He points out that journalists could either report issues as they were (high crime rates and weaknesses of the justice system) or sympathise with the new government and pay less attention to the issues. He argues that neither of the two "produces good journalism" (Harber, 2004, p 83). Harber further points out to a more moderate way, which is to balance the good and the bad but at the same time says that is difficult to achieve. Journalists who wrote about HIV and AIDS were not an exception to these challenges. To add to that, they had to write about a disease that had a potential of destroying the nation at a time when no one seemed to understand it (Harber 2004).

The media is often viewed as society's watchdog and having an obligation to be socially responsible (Berry et al., 1995). This means the media is expected to watch over government and report issues that have a negative impact on citizens such as corruption and government

failures. They are required to write balanced stories which help their readers make informed decisions (Berry *et a*l., 1995). At the dawn of South Africa's democracy, HIV was new and the previous government had dismissed it as a 'gay disease'. When the new government took over, HIV and AIDS were proliferating at a rapid pace. At the time, there were too many problems that needed government attention and because of the denialist stance of the then deputy president and later president Thabo Mbeki, HIV did not get the attention it deserved from the government. Although the media was free and protected by the constitution, it had challenges as well. There were many stories at the time that needed to be covered (Harber, 2004) and the media was overwhelmed. Issues such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), education, crime, employment, service delivery, poverty eradication and the rebuilding of a system that included everyone needed to be covered. Health could have just been considered as one of the things that needed attention not as a priority even though people did not understand HIV and the number of infected people rose every day.

The next section looks at how the ANC's policies on HIV and AIDS did not yield expected results because of the way the party handled them.

1.3) Government's controversial response to HIV/AIDS and the media

The Apartheid regime was a system that focused more on dividing people than social delivery (Schneider & Stein, 2001). The new democratic government was, on the other hand, expected to unite the South African people and address social imbalances. Schneider & Stein (2001) argue that when the ANC took over in 1994, it was aware of the potential of HIV and AIDS to affect national construction because it was involved in the drafting of the Maputo statement on HIV and AIDS which stated that the prevention of the pandemic was important (Schneider & Stein, 2001). There were other efforts by the ANC to deal with HIV and AIDS. In 1992 together with the department of health, the party held a conference on AIDS in South

Africa leading to the formation of the National AIDS Committee of South Africa (NACOSA) (Schneider & Stein, 2001). The committee was meant to coordinate the response to HIV and AIDS. This was followed by the formulation of an AIDS plan aimed at coming up with programmes that would be implemented over the coming two years. "The AIDS plan assigned a central role to government, as a leader, funder and implementer of a comprehensive response to AIDS" (Schneider & Stein, 2001, p. 725). The ANC government adopted the programme and declared it a "presidential lead project giving it an advantage over other programmes to get resources meant for reconstruction and development" (Schneider & Stein, 2001, p. 275). Such good programmes portrayed the ANC as committed to the fight against the pandemic. It was therefore natural for people to expect the new government to prioritise the fight against the pandemic. This may also have put the government under pressure as it needed to fulfil its promises—a step that may have been the cause for the chaos that followed.

Despite what seemed to be a good start by the ANC government on fighting HIV and AIDS, acts of desperation to act on the pandemic and getting a solution (Schneider & Stein, 2001), seemed to drive the government from one mistake to another. AIDS scandals broke out and according to researchers, these dominated media coverage of the pandemic.

The first scandal was the Sarafina saga which broke in 1995 when the cabinet commissioned a musical drama about HIV and AIDS—Sarafina II— a sequel to Mbongeni Ngema's Sarafina. Ngema (the director of Sarafina I) was awarded a R14-million contract to produce the drama. This was done without consulting stakeholders and the sponsors of the project — the European Union (Schneider & Stein, 2001). When this came out, there was a huge outcry. It became a scandal and the media covered it. The contract was later terminated and the play was cancelled.

Criticism of government's denialism led to growing civil society activity which culminated in court cases. In 1998 the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association (PMA) went to court to challenge a law allowing the importation of cheap generic medicine, claiming that the move would interfere with their intellectual rights (Fiedman & Mottiar, 2005). The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) opposed this and organised people to demonstrate against the move. PMA then withdrew the case. The South African government refused to heed to calls by activists and researchers to use AZT (an anti-retroviral medication used to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV) on pregnant HIV positive women (Palitza *et al.,* 2010). They argued that they would rather concentrate on an "educational prevention campaign than treatment" (Palitza *et al.,* 2010, p. X1). The government claimed that AZT was dangerous to use (Cullinan & Thom, 2009). TAC together with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and other stakeholders took the matter to the Constitutional Court. In July 2002 the court ruled that it was unconstitutional for the government not to provide a programme to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and ordered the government to provide nevirapine to prevent the transmission of HIV from mothers to babies. In 2003 the government then decided to make available antiretroviral drugs to all HIV positive people (Fiedman & Mottiar, 2005). As to be expected, these highly contentious (scandalous) events were religiously reported by the media and saw the topic of HIV and AIDS enter the public domain more prominently.

Various statements by government officials expressed views that were rejected by scientists and this sparked more media controversy For example, in 2006 the then Minister of Health Doctor Manto Tshabalala-Msimang sparked great public dispute by claiming that HIV and AIDS could be treated with garlic and beetroot instead of antiretroviral drugs (Palitza *et al.,* 2010). During the time, government claimed that the anti-retroviral drugs (ART) were "toxic and weakened the immune system" (Palitza *et al.,* 2010 Cullinan & Thom, 2009). Mbeki

furthermore questioned if HIV caused AIDS. This created more social disputes between the government, AIDS activists and the scientific community. The controversy made headlines. It is therefore through stories and incidences such as these that HIV and AIDS continued to make headlines as controversies. The Virodene will be the focus scandal for this research to try and establish how stories became scandals and if journalists are responsible for creating scandals.

The next section covers critics and activists' views of how the media covered HIV and AIDS in the new South Africa.

1.4) Criticisms of media coverage of HIV and AIDS

Media coverage of HIV and AIDS in the early years of South Africa's democracy was criticised by activists and researchers (Schneider, 1998; Stein, 2001; Stein, 2002; Siyamkela, 2003 and Finlay, 2004) who found that the media had not given enough coverage to the issue of HIV and AIDS. Some criticised journalism's professional values (such as news values) for causing journalists not to focus on the 'real' HIV and AIDS issue.

Jacobs and Johnson (2007, p. 139) conclude that news values may be the main contributors to prioritizing celebrities and prominent people like former president Thabo Mbeki as well as "scandals, conflict and controversy", instead of the effect of HIV on ordinary people. Ridgard and Spurr in Palitza *et al*. (2010*)* note that "the frequency of HIV coverage dropped where there was absence of key conflicts, events or celebrity" (Palitza *et al.* p. 107). They argue that journalist loyalty to news values may have been the main contributor to the way journalists reported on HIV. "HIV is seen as having a low news value for several reasons, among them notions such as 'HIV/AIDS is not about me' and 'HIV is not dramatic enough' " (Finlay, 2004, p.77). Finlay's research found that there was a lack of analysis role of HIV in the press

and that HIV reporting was also affected by the media's interest in making profit. Another reason closely linked to news values is what Jacobs and Johnson call 'AIDS fatigue'. They argue that editors sometimes point out that readers are "saturated with and turned off by HIV and AIDS and as a result they don't see the point of regular coverage" (Jacobs & Johnson, 2007, p. 140).

Sometimes the media was criticised for practising objectivity. Stein (2003) criticised the media for writing about both the orthodox and dissidents views in equal measure and leaving it to the readers "largely unable to understand the terms of the debate, to decide on which stance to adopt" (Stein, 2003, p. 5). Objectivity, she argues, brought the 'dissidents' views to the 'public discourse'. Stein's study found that the need to remain neutral and objective limited journalists' willingness to practice the advocacy role. This will be fully discussed in the literature review section.

1.5) Aim

Unlike previous research which concentrated on HIV and AIDS reporting through media coverage analysis, this research looks at journalists' perspectives and how they understood their role in a changing political environment and how professional values, in their view, affected the reporting of the pandemic. It is important to understand from the journalists' perspective how they view the way they played the role of society's watchdogs in a new democracy that brought with it many challenges for the media. According to Harber (2004) the challenges included racial issues. White journalists were accused of supporting the previous Apartheid government while black journalists were accused of not being patriotic to the new government (Harber, 2004; Malan, 2006). In this research, I therefore ask journalists if their race affected their relationship with the government and if that affected the way they reported about HIV and AIDS. During this period (soon after the country became a

democracy) there were a number of other issues crying for media attention. These issues included informing the public about their rights in a democracy, the country's education systems, eradicating poverty, crime, employment and improving the lives of South Africans. This research looks at whether these competing concerns affected the way HIV and AIDS were reported.

HIV and AIDS continued to be a big issue in South Africa, even after the period covered by this research (1996-1999), making its coverage worth researching in this day. HIV continued to make headlines as a controversy, for example, President Jacob Zuma's shower story in which he told the court that he took a shower after having unprotected sex with an HIV positive woman to reduce the chances of contracting the virus (news24 April,5 2006). Finlay, 2004; Steiner, 2001 had found that media coverage of HIV as a controversy was leaving out real issues affecting ordinary people living with HIV.

With much studies focusing on what the media failed to do in terms of covering HIV, a gap was created in this area of study — the voices of journalists explaining how and why they focused on HIV coverage the way they did. The research seeks to close the gap by bringing in the voices of journalists. It uses their views to establish how they operated in a situation where they were faced with multifarious challenges and expectations in a transitional political climate.

Research questions

1. Do journalists feel they reported HIV/AIDS stories fairly?

   (a). Was HIV/AIDS only covered as a scandal/controversy or treated as a separate health story? (b) Did journalists deliberately avoid serious informative stories about HIV/AIDS when they were not scandals for fear of boring readers?

(c) Did journalists consider HIV/AIDS a minor concern compared to the array of other challenges faced by the country after liberation?

2. Do journalists feel they performed their professional role as watch-dogs of the state when reporting on government's handling of HIV/AIDS?

(a) Were journalists sympathetic to the new democratic government and the challenges it inherited from the previous oppressive regime?

(b) Did any sympathetic feelings or loyalties to the new government affect the way journalists reported on the state and how it managed HIV/AIDS?

(c) Did any race-related feelings of opposition to the new government affect the ways some journalists reported on how it handled HIV/AIDS?

3. Do journalists feel they lived up to their professional and ethical standards as journalists in reporting on HIV/AIDS stories?

(a) Were journalists' primary motive in HIV/AIDS stories informing the readers or selling stories?

(b) Were journalists fair and objective in their reporting on HIV/AIDS?

(c) Was thorough research conducted before stories were published and facts verified?

(d) Did journalists deliberately create scandals to sell HIV/AIDS stories or were such stories scandals by themselves?

1.6) What is the Virodene saga?

As this research pays particular attention to the Virodene saga, it is necessary to provide some details of how the story unfolded. The scandal broke out in 1997 when the government considered funding an unauthorised HIV trial. It happened when two University of Pretoria scientists, Ziggie and Olga Visser, approached the then minister of health Dr Nkosazana

Dlamini Zuma about a trial they were conducting on AIDS patients using a freezing solution known as *dimethylformamid*e which became known as Virodene (Natrass, 2010). The properties of Virodene were discovered by Olga Visser in 1995. She claimed that she had put a rat heart in the substance and froze it and the substance made it beat again. At the time there were claims that the discovery could even be a more important medical advance than Christiaan Barnard's first heart transplant in 1967 (Cullinan & Thom, 2009). The Vissers then started a company called Cryopreservation Technology (CPT) to explore their discovery. It was then that they claimed to have discovered antiviral properties in Virodene. In July 1996, the researchers with the head of cardio-thoracic surgery at the University of Pretoria, Professor Dirk du Plessis, and a medical registrar, Carl Landauer, met the then minister of health Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma "to discuss the possibility of conducting a clinical trial on AIDS patients" (Cullinan & Thom, 2009, p. 3). In his essay published in Cullinan & Thom, (2009), titled; *In the beginning there was Virodene*, James Myburgh points out that in January 1997 the team presented their findings to Dlamini-Zuma. "Virodene, they claimed, worked quickly, allowed patients to regain weight rapidly and reversed even terminal cases of AIDS" (Cullinan & Thom, 2009 p. 3). The researchers were allowed to present their findings to cabinet (Natrass, 2007). They brought two people who participated in the research to give testimonies about how effective Virodene was.

The researchers had, however, conducted the research without following proper procedure like getting approval from the Medicines Control Council (MCC). After conducting a review on the drug the MCC stopped the testing of the drug (Natrass, 2007; Cullinan & Thom, 2009). It was later discovered that the findings were not true. "Apart from failing to get the permission to conduct their trial, they had jumped straight from discovering the literature on the supposed anti-viral properties of the substance, (which they misread), to testing the drug

on human subjects, had had no toxicological experiences themselves and had massively miscalculated the safe dosage of the drug" (Cullinan & Thom, 2009, p. 4).

Despite continual rejection by the MCC, the researchers had support from the then deputy president Mbeki and Dlamini-Zuma. This support placed Mbeki and the South African government in a vulnerable position—going against a scientific establishment on a scientific issue was a huge risk for the government. A government going against institutions meant to offer expert advice is, in itself, enough ground to create controversy. In September 1997 the scientists distributed the drug illegally. The MCC intervened and the selling of the drug was stopped (Cullinan & Thom, 2009).

The story became more political with the minister of health accusing the Democratic Party (DP) of "hating ANC supporters" saying "if they had their way we would all die of AIDS" (Cullinan & Thom, 2009, p. 7). This was after a DP MP Mike Ellis revealed that the ANC had been promised shares in CPT. Senior officials at the MCC were suspiciously removed from their positions. All these put the story into the limelight as there appeared to be too many suspicious events (Cullinan & Thom, 2009).

In the face of the public storm, the government was ultimately forced to back away from the project. The Virodene researchers tried their luck in other African countries like Tanzania and Botswana in 2001, but trials in Tanzania proved that Virodene was not a cure for HIV and that it had no effect on the virus (Cullinan & Thom, 2009). What made the story so noteworthy was the extent of support by the government and even party, particularly Mbeki himself. According to Myburgh it was later revealed that the ANC was involved in organising funding for Virodene**.** (Cullinan & Thom, 2009). Some of Mbeki's articles supporting Virodene were published in newspapers. The fact that people were allowed to present in cabinet despite scientific bodies' concerns, brought the story into the limelight.

The Virodene scandal will be the focus of this research to try and establish how stories became scandals and if journalists are responsible for creating scandals. The Virodene scandal is an important focal point because it marked the beginning of a long misunderstanding between the government, the media and activists. It was the first scandal where the ANC government went against the scientific establishment. Unlike the Sarafina saga that came before it, the effects of the Virodene saga were felt long after the scandal disappeared as the government felt it was not given a chance to present its case and continued to refer to it (Cullinan & Thom, 2009). Facts that originated from the scandal kept coming up in controversies that followed. For example, Myburgh in Cullinan and Thom (2009) points out that Mbeki's stance against AZT (a drug used to prevent mother to child transmission of HIV) was based on the fact that it was toxic yet he was willing to support Virodene even if scientists pointed out that it could be dangerous. After the Virodene saga, there were more cases of government going against scientists. The scandal put the government in a bad light because instead of fulfilling earlier commitments to fight against HIV and AIDS, the government seemed to now put people's lives in danger by approving a deadly substance to be used to 'treat' people. **2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

In investigating the role played by journalists in HIV and AIDS reporting, this paper will draw from a number of theoretical concepts, the main one being social responsibility theory. This is one of the normative theories that explains what the role of the media should be and how journalists should operate. The theory states that the media should have an obligation to be socially responsible (Berry *et al.,* 1995). It supports journalistic professional values and ideologies such as objectivity and fairness in news reporting. Concepts like news values and gatekeeping, and professional ideologies are used to support this theory and explain factors influencing journalists' daily operations.

2.1) The role of social responsibility theory/watchdog role in HIV/AIDS reporting

The Social responsibility theory has its origins from the 1947 American commission of freedom of the press, also known as the Hutchins commission (Middleton, 2009). It was requested by the founder of *Time Magazine* Henry Luce to find out if the freedom of the press was under threat given an increase in totalitarian regimes throughout the world. The commission was led by the then president of the University of Chicago Robert Hutchins (Middleton, 2009). The commission came up with five guidelines for a socially responsible media in a report titled *Free and Responsible Press*. These say the press should provide:

- A truthful, compressive and intelligent account of the day's event in a context which gives meaning,
- a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism,
- a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another,
- a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of the society, and
- a way of reaching every member of the society by the currents of information, thought and feeling which the press supplies; (*Free and Responsible Press,* 1947, p.20)

Siebert, Peterson, Schramm (1956) call the social responsibility theory 'new libertarianism'. It came at a time when media ownership was falling into the hands of the few rich people giving these people too much power over the media. The Hutchins commission found that "protection against government is not now enough freedom to guarantee that a man who has something to say shall have a chance to say it. The owners and managers of the press determine which persons, which facts, and which version of these facts, shall reach the public" (Siebert *et al*., 1956, p. 4). The social responsibility theory therefore ensures that freedom of the media is neutralised by an obligation to be responsible to society "to see that

all sides are fairly presented and that the public has enough information to decide" (Siebert *et al*., p. 5). According to the social responsibility theory press independence should be "reconciled with obligation to society" (McQuail, 1994, p. 116). Siebert *et al.* point out that where the press cannot fulfil the obligation, there should be some sort of monitoring to ensure that they do. Berry *et al*. (1995, p. 122), further point out that if the media fail to be socially responsible people can "force the government to take steps to regulate the media". Social responsibility theory expects the media to be educators, for example, educating people about their rights to vote and dangers posed by diseases like HIV and AIDS among other significant issues. In doing so, the media should, however, maintain their financial independence. According to McQuail social responsibility means the media should commit to set "professional standards that of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance" (McQuail, 1994, p.117). In fulfilling the social responsibility theory, the media is supposed to play the role of a watchdog—holding government accountable to the public by informing them about government's shortcomings.

The social responsibility theory accepts the six functions of the press defined by the libertarian theory although it does not agree with the way some of these functions have been interpreted and practiced by the media. These functions are:

> "servicing the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs, enlighten the public so as to make it capable of self-government, safeguarding the rights of the individuals by serving as a watchdog against government, serving the economic system primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising, providing entertainment, and maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of social interest;" (Siebert *et al*., 1956, p. 74).

These approaches have faced criticism from a wide range of quarters. Berry *et al*. (1995) argue that from a liberal perspective "responsibility is just a nice name for authoritarian regulation" (Berry *et al*., 1995, p. 78) stating that in relation to the four theories of the press, (authoritarian, soviet communist, libertarian and social responsibility theories), the theory should be linked to the authoritarian and the soviet communist theories "as permutations of collectivism, all quite inimical to liberal thought" (Berry *et al.,* 1995, p.78). The critics argue that the theory gives more emphasis to the community as opposed to individuals, making the community reign over individuals (Berry *et al.,*). Berry *et al*. also argue that instead of; "being a true communitarianism, and rather than posing a serious threat to class and corporate control of the media, social responsibility actually endorses the status quo by erecting standards of performance that can make monopoly media seem like the voice of the people, even as the media keep the people silent and stupid" (Berry *et al.,* 1995, p. 78).

Another critic Fedler (1978) points out that journalists favour a theory that supports media freedom over those that give them responsibilities, suggesting that journalists don't necessarily enjoy responsibilities more than they do their liberty to make free decisions. He says journalists believe that "occasional abuses" of media freedom "are more tolerable than government control" (Fedler, 1978, p. 98). Fedler (1978) quotes John Merill who criticise the social responsibility theory saying that "attempts to list media's responsibility are arrogant, dictatorial and that the media will become more controlled if they accept the responsibilities" (Fedler, 1978, p. 98). Merill in Fedler (1978) says the theory implies that journalists cannot determine what is socially responsible adding that it needs to be challenged. According to this critic the only responsibility journalists should have is to "remain free". He says through theories like the social responsibility journalists give up their rights. According to Fedler some critics have described the social responsibility theory as an "idealistic nonsense", with some proposing a 'real' theory called "Make-A-Buck" (Fedler, 1978, p. 99). The critics, he

says, argue that the media exist to make profit, not to protect or educate the public. “They believe the media simply give the public whatever is most profitable” (Fedler, 1978, p. 99). These conflicting considerations form part of the investigation of this research in ascertaining the true motivations of HIV and AIDS reporters post the Apartheid era.

Christians *et al* (2009) identify four overlapping roles of the media in a democracy. The roles are a development of the four theories of the media identified by Siebert *et al,* which some critics have described as outdated. The roles identified by Christians *et al* are:

- Monitorial role — this ranges from the relative passing of information to carrying out strong watchdog functions like investigative journalism (Christians, *et al,* 2009)
- Facilitative — this is closely related to the monitorial role. It is also related to Siebert *et al*’s social responsibility theory which requires the media to be accountable by giving information in such a way that people make informed decisions. This role supports the press “as the fourth estate in democratic societies that support debate and people’s decision making” Christians, *et al,* 2009, p. 126). According to this role, the press is supposed to “develop a shared moral framework for community and society rather than just looking after individual rights and interests” (Christians, *et al,* 2009, p. 126).
- Radical role — in this role, the media is supposed to expose “abuse of power, raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality and potential for change. The aim of this role is for a fundamental change in society” (Christians, *et al,* 2009, p. 126)
- Collaborative role — this role is ideal for transitional democracies like South Africa with “their pressure toward economic and social development under conditions of scarce resources and immature political institutions” (Christians, *et al,* 2009, p. 1267).

It is collaboration between the media and state. This may however, limit the independence of the media and the journalism profession.

In explicating the nature of work performed by HIV and AIDS journalists post 1994, this research adopts the monitorial role which places the media as society's watchdog together with Siebert *et al's* social responsibility theory. This is done because the unique socio-political context of South Africa after liberation seemed to demand these kinds of media roles.

The social responsibility theory applies to the gravity and effect of HIV and AIDS as a social as well as a national crisis which the media was expected to address. The media was expected to educate the public about HIV and AIDS because at the time referred to by this research (1996-1999), people were not well informed about the pandemic. The government on the other hand seemed to be struggling to manage the HIV and AIDS crisis. It was the media's obligations under the social responsibility theory to remind the government about its promises to the people and what it committed to do. In the Virodene saga, the government was going against a scientific establishment (with more knowledge), it was the media's role to watch out for the people by playing a watchdog or monitorial role. As a watchdog, the media was supposed to inform the people about the controversy and the government stance and how that could affect them.

2.1a) News values, gatekeeping process and professional ideologies

Schudson (1989) in Berkowitz (1997) argues that news is a constructed reality. This means that what is discussed in the media is "actively created" (Cowling, 2007), using professional ideologies through what is known as the gatekeeping process. This is a "process by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into

hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 57). Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p.1) describe gatekeeping as the "centre of the media's role in modern public life". This is the process beginning from the selection of a news idea by a reporter from the many news events, to the decisions made by journalists in their news conferences, and diary meetings at which the choice of which story becomes the lead is made. In making these decisions or choices, journalists become gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In doing so, journalists become mediators who; "transform billions of events into manageable subject of media messages" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 3). They argue that gatekeeping affects the social reality of people through determining the way people define the world, that is, shaping the audience's thoughts about what is important in the world. This means that people's frame of reference about what is significant in the world at any given historical moment is determined by what they see and read in news media. The frequency or scarcity of scandal-free HIV and AIDS stories in the media within 1996-1999 can be used as an indication of whether HIV and AIDS was generally considered a significant topic or not by the journalism community. Research has shown that throughout the gatekeeping process journalists do not take decisions based on their personal interests but use professional news values such as timeliness, human interest, proximity, as well as professional ideologies (Berkowitz (1997). These are values that journalists have and are visible in their decision making (Cowling, 2007). This was demonstrated by research done on two editors from different generations which found that both editors made similar decisions in selecting news. David Manning White in his research: *The gate keeper: a case study in the selection of news* shows that, selection is seen as a process where individual gatekeepers put aside their personal beliefs and preferences and choose stories according to newsworthiness (Berkowitz, 1997). The study was based on a wire editor in his 40s. The wire editor was for the purposes of the research, given the name, Mr. Gates. His job was to decide which stories made it to the

papers and which ones did not. Mr Gates gave the researcher all copies including the ones he selected and the ones he rejected and gave reasons why he rejected stories. White concluded that Mr Gates used "basic journalistic beliefs" in making decisions (Berkowitz, 1997). A similar study was conducted by Glen L. Bleske in 1991. This time it was with a female gatekeeper, 'Ms Gates'. The study looked at issues such as gender, the time difference between Mr. Gates and Ms. Gates, and technological differences. The results showed that there was not much difference between the two gatekeepers when it came to news selection (Berkowitz, 1997). Ms Gates, though female, had a news selection that was not affected by her gender. "Both gatekeepers saw their job as the implementation of journalistic judgment in the face of organisational constraints" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 54).

The gatekeeping theory is however criticised for ignoring the fact that news is not just selected but 'constructed'—"an interaction between journalists and their sources" (Schudson, 2003, p. 3). It is also criticised for not addressing the fact that some generators of information such as public relations people "may anticipate the criteria of the gatekeepers in their efforts to get through the gates" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 9) and take advantage of the process to get publicity. According to Berkowitz, "the word keeper individualises a bureaucratic phenomenon and implicitly transforms organisational bias into individual subjectivity" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 9). This supports the notion that in making decisions on which news stories to write and publish, journalists also follow organisational policies not just what they, as individuals think. Berkowitz notes that the selection of news, (which is part of the gatekeeping process), has some challenges which include the fact that not all journalists cover what they want and that they are limited by things like "deadline and the amount of equipment" (Berkowitz , 1997, p. 156). This consideration will be used to measure how journalists covered HIV and AIDS— whether or not they were influenced by personal experiences and whether organisational policies had an influence on their coverage.

In covering stories, journalists also use professional ideologies such as objectivity and fairness: separating facts from opinions. According to Berkowitz (1997) it is through professional training and the experiences journalists learn at work or a mixture of the two that make them share these professional norms. This study uses objectivity as a professional ideology because of its potential to clarify why journalists covered HIV the way they did.

Objectivity is an important journalistic professional ethic. Other aspects of news professionalism such as source selection and news judgement come from objectivity. The ideal of objectivity argues that facts can be separated from values or opinion and that journalists act "as neutral transmitters who pass along events to an audience" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 24). Objectivity calls for journalists to play a facilitative role to ensure the public's right of access to facts is free from partisan values. It calls for journalists to distinguish facts from values. In this model, news reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind. In this case, journalists play a facilitative role in the debate by not taking sides but by pushing opposing sides to make their arguments clear (Cowling & Hamilton, 2007). Establishing whether journalists were objective in their coverage of HIV will help highlight how they juggled their role as society's watchdog.

Criticising objectivity, Berkowitz (1997) argues that it is found in the way journalists behave rather than in news stories. He further argues that for journalists objectivity does not mean that they are "impartial observers of events but that they seek out the facts and report them as fairly and in as balanced a way as possible" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 143). Phillips in Berkowitz (1997) notes that asking journalists to define objectivity as "the balanced reporting of facts" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 143) does not take into consideration the question of whether objectivity can be achieved or not. "By definition {of objectivity} then journalists are turned into copying machines who simply record the world rather than evaluate it" (Berkowitz, 1997, p.

143). The research uses HIV and AIDS reporting to check whether objectivity can be achieved or just exists in journalists' behaviour. Would the reporters be able to be objective while dealing with an issue that affected them as well? Can objectivity be obtained where government is perceived to be wrong and the media is seeing itself as society's watchdog? These are some of the issues covered in this research in order to establish how journalists handled HIV and AIDS reporting during a highly contentious time.

Randall (1996) argues that it is difficult to avoid subjectivity when writing stories because people naturally prefer certain things to others. "…no reporter or news editor try as they might professionally to suppress their own prejudices will ever be able to do so completely" (Randall, 1996, p. 23). He points out that this becomes a threat to the profession when "journalists (often news editors) try to pass off their prejudices as objectivity" (Randall, 1996, p. 24). Randall suggests that it is through "awareness of the tendency" that the issue of excess subjectivity can be solved.

In this study, journalistic news values and professional ideologies such as truth-telling and objectivity are used to find if they had an impact of HIV reporting. Whatever the limitations of concepts like objectivity, the study draws on the perspectives of working journalists to see to what extent these values and professional ideologies can be seen to operate in the decisions and approaches they took

2.1 b) Defining a scandal

The online Oxford dictionary defines a scandal as "an event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage" (http://oxforddictionaries.com). According to the same dictionary, a controversy is a "prolonged public disagreement or heated discussion" (http://oxforddictionaries.com). From these definitions we can deduce that scandals always

play out in the visibility of the public domain. Since the media act as transmitters of information to the public, media organisations and journalists are often accused of actively concocting scandals. According to Kepplinger, & Ehmig, & Hart (2002) in Kepplinger, Geiss & Siebert 2012 "scandals evolve if someone accuses public figures or organisations of having violated social norms or of having harmed someone or something and relevant media covers it intensely causing consistent views and widespread anger among the audience" (Kepplinger, Geiss & Siebert, 2012, p 659). The media has in many cases been accused of sensationalising issues and deliberately creating scandals in order to sell their stories. Critics of HIV and AIDS reporting in South Africa accused the media of covering an HIV and AIDS story only when it was a scandal. By focusing on the Virodene story this study examines the role of journalists and the media in how it unfolded from being a potential breakthrough to a scandal.

2.2) LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2.1) HIV and AIDS reporting in the new South Africa

Significant research has been carried out on HIV and AIDS coverage in the media in South Africa because the media is seen as a key role player in informing and educating people about important issues. A key theme in the research has been the point that the media failed to play an advocacy role and that HIV and AIDS only made headlines when it was a controversy or when it involved politics. The studies give an idea of how the pandemic has been depicted in the media. Most of the research done at the time was driven by activist agenda trying to get journalists to play the advocacy role in HIV and AIDS reporting (Palitza *et al.,* 2010). Palitza *et al* (2010) note that despite the high level of HIV politicisation and its effects on the economy, "Its significance is hardly reflected in the country's print media" (Palitza *et al*., 2010, p. 114). They note that HIV and AIDS hardly made it to the front page because it was considered as 'soft news', "Politics, business, finance and sport are considered 'hard news'

and therefore the biggest newsmakers while health and HIV simply do not often make the list of top news items" (Palitza *et al.*, 2010, p. 115).

According to Finlay (2004) HIV only made headlines when the topic was directly related to politics. Palitza *et al* (2010) quote the then editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, Ferial Haffajee, acknowledging that it is difficult to put HIV news on the front page because "a non-political story on the cover does not sell" (Palitza *et al*., 2010, p.115). This suggests that journalists might have been motivated by the imperative to write stories that sell rather than by the responsibility to inform the public.

Stein (2003) and Malan (2006) found that government's stance on HIV and its politicization were central to the coverage of the pandemic and "shaped the media's response to the pandemic" (Stein, 2003, p. 13).

In their essay titled *Media, Social Movements and the state: competing images of HIV/AIDS in South Africa,* Jacobs and Johnson (2007) note that the coverage of HIV in mainstream media has not been treated as a serious issue given its impact. They argue that the stories lack the voices of people affected by the pandemic like those living with HIV. The stories only covered government and AIDS activists.

> Reporters seldom interrogate the bigger picture context particularly the impact of the changes in economic policies on the ability of state infrastructures to implement a comprehensive AIDS treatment and prevention program or how larger debates about the right to public health care services would impact any large scale societal response to the epidemic; (Jacobs & Johnson, 2007, p. 137).

The authors (2007) further argue that concentrating on controversies confused the public who were "left confused, bewildered with no hope; but with the knowledge that only scandals

(such as Sarafina II and the quackery of Virodene) are what our government and science system are about" (*Media Tenor* in Jacobs & Johnson, 2007, p. 137).

Jacobs & Johnson further note that the effect of HIV (which was killing millions of South Africans) was ignored in favour of what they call "actors who have competed to set the agenda for AIDS in South Africa" (Jacobs & Johnson, 2007, p. 138). This seems to support the allegations that activist and political groups were given more publicity in the media, detracting from a focus on HIV itself.

In addition, several other researchers (Finlay 2004; Siyamkela, 2003; Stein, 2001; 2002; Scheneider, 1998) also found that the HIV was only covered when there was controversy or as a reaction to government's actions. Malan (2006) argues that politicisation of HIV in South Africa shaped the way journalists covered the pandemic and influenced the way South Africans understood it. She further argues that this and the country's Apartheid background "framed responses by government and the public's reporting about state policies" (Malan, 2006, p. 42).

Another recurring theme in the history of HIV reporting has been the lack of understanding of HIV and AIDS in South Africa at the time. In the early days of HIV, journalists themselves did not understand the pandemic. According to Malan (2006) when the Virodene story broke, some journalists thought Virodene could be a potential treatment.

Such literature reflects thoughts and perceptions about the actions and role of the media in HIV and AIDS reporting. However, it also brings attention to the fact of the missing perspectives of the journalists themselves which is exactly what this study undertakes. While the previous body of research had voices of media critics and HIV and AIDS advocates

criticising the way journalists covered the pandemic, this research does what previous researchers have thus far not done: bring journalists into the equation.

3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methods used in this study. I used interviews with journalists who wrote HIV and AIDS stories, and a brief content analysis of how the Virodene saga broke. The content analysis helped me in selecting journalists to be interviewed and the interviews provided the first hand information required to answer the questions raised by this research.

3.1) Qualitative research

The form of qualitative research used in this study is interviews. Kvale (1996) in Marshal and Rossman (2011, p.142) defines qualitative interviews as "a constructive site of knowledge where two (or more) individuals discuss a theme of mutual interest." Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) in Marshal & Rossman (2011, p. 142) liken the way researchers conduct their interviews to a "miner and traveller". The miner approach is where the interviewee knows the subject to be discussed well while the traveller approaches people with no knowledge in the area just to explore the research, for example, interviewing the general public on what they

think about media coverage of HIV as opposed to talking to media experts or practitioners. This research takes the miner approach because the subjects interviewed have experience and knowledge in their field of work. Journalists who reported on HIV and those who worked in the newsroom were interviewed and the responses recorded. The interviewer's role here was a "more distant and objective" one as well as to "dig nuggets of knowledge of the subject's pure experiences" (Marshal & Rossman, 2011, p. 142). In this research, journalists who reported on the Virodene saga at its initial stages, and those who wrote stories on HIV and understood its dynamics at the time were interviewed. This method is preferred because of its capability to bring out first hand narratives on how journalists felt and thought as they reported on the HIV issues. These journalists were personally involved and are the best people to interview instead of experts and AIDS advocates who did not cover media stories.

The research used a topical or guided interview which "explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects the way the participant frames and structures responses" (Marshal & Rossman 2011, p. 143). In this case, the topic is how journalists viewed their role in HIV and AIDS reporting at a time when the media was expected to play a watchdog role and at the same time being sensitive to the new government. In this type of interview, the way the interviewee views the subject discussed should reflect what he/she thinks and views it (the emic perspective) as opposed to the way the interviewer sees things (the etic perspective) (Marshal & Rossman, 2011). Interviews with journalists were recorded and transcribed.

3.2) How content analysis was used

To find out how the media covered HIV, the research used a brief content analysis of internet archived newspaper cuttings (1996 – 1999). The articles were on HIV and AIDS, including the Virodene and Sarafina scandals coverage. This helped in bringing to light how the

Virodene saga broke and how it came into the media. This was also used to identify the best interviewees who, in this case, are the journalists who wrote the stories as well as to help frame interview questions appropriately in a way that speaks directly to the way in which the stories were written.

3.3) Details of the interview subjects

In this section I give details of the journalists interviewed for this research and the positions they held at the time referred to by this research.

Lesley Cowling: Cowling was science editor at the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper. She covered the Virodene saga as it broke and also offered information about working as a journalist in the new South Africa.

Janine Meyer: She was a medical correspondent at *The Star* newspaper. She also covered the Virodene saga when it broke. She continued covering HIV and AIDS after the Virodene saga and offers first-hand information about how it was working as a journalist in the new South Africa.

Anso Thom: she was a journalist at *The Star* newspaper. She started covering health stories in 1998. Before that, she worked for the same newspaper as a crime reporter, and as a general news and politics reporter. She gave an account of how it was working as a journalist in the new South Africa and what she thinks about the way HIV and AIDS were covered at the time.

Bhungane Mzolo: He was health correspondent at the *Natal Witness* and then moved to the *Sowetan* newspaper. He wrote stories on HIV and AIDS but did not write about the Virodene saga.

Patrick Bulger: He was a political editor at *The Star* newspaper. He gave us information from an editor's perspective. This helped in getting the view of a decision maker in the selection of news and how they viewed HIV and AIDS. He wrote few stories on HIV and AIDS.

Kerry Cullinan: She worked as an associate editor for *Siyaya Magazine, Idasa*. She started writing about HIV and AIDS at a later stage. She however understood the dynamics of HIV and AIDS reporting at the time referred to by this report.

Kgopotso Bodibe: He was a producer of magazine and talk programmes at SAfm radio and later joined specialists health news agency *Health-e*. He produced programmes on HIV and AIDS.

Clare Keeton: She wrote stories about HIV and AIDS but did not write about any scandals. She also gives her experience as a journalist in the new South Africa and her coverage of HIV and AIDS issues.

3.3a) Interview process: How interviewees were recruited

I searched for journalists who were writing about HIV and AIDS from the Wits online database—Sabinet where I accessed articles on the subject. I then identified them from the different newspaper clippings. I searched for them on the internet. The ones I interviewed then referred me to their colleagues. I conducted face to face interviews with the ones in Johannesburg and telephonic interviews in the studio with those based outside Johannesburg. All the interviews were recorded. I prepared interview questions but I did not strictly stick to them. I asked follow up questions where necessary and asked different questions in cases where my prepared questions did not suffice.

3.3a.i) The interview questions

Below is the interview schedule I used when speaking to the respondents. All these questions were tailored in such a way as to address the research question: How journalists viewed their role in HIV and AIDS reporting.

1. How was it like working as a journalist in the new South Africa?
2. Did you ever feel any pressure to be loyal or give the new government a chance to mature?
3. Was there any pressure from the government to force journalists to do things their (government) way?
4. Did you ever feel any pressure along racial lines? If white did you fear that if you wrote issues that were critical to the government you could be labelled racist? As a black journalist did you feel like you owed it to the government to write stuff that supported the government?
5. Did you write any stories on any of the HIV scandals? If so which ones?
6. Did you feel like you did the HIV story justice?
7. How was your understanding of HIV at the time given the fact that it was a new thing in South Africa?
8. What is your response to allegations that journalists did not do enough to cover the pandemic?
9. What made you as journalists concentrate on covering HIV only as scandals and not as a standalone issue as alleged in some reports?
10. What factors played part in the coverage of the pandemic?

3.4) Limitations in the interviewing process

The interviewees relied on their memories and because this happened a long time ago there were things that they could not remember. This made some of the things they said

sound a bit general; lacking the clear picture that could have been created if the issue was current. Two interviewees gave me a general perspective instead of personal experiences. What they said did not bring the real substance of having dealt with the issue but made it sound as if they were watching from a distance. I also conducted some of the interviews over the phones and sometimes the network connections were bad resulting in some parts of the interviews being inaudible. This delayed the process of transcribing my interviews as I was struggling to hear.

The fact that I was interviewing journalists about an issue that affected them professionally can have some disadvantages. I sent them emails on what my research was about before interviewing them. They may have chosen to portray themselves as having fulfilled all professional values. The other reason may have been the fact that they were now looking at what they did a long time ago and may have unconsciously corrected it in their minds and as a result, given a picture that all was done well. They were involved in the work and sometimes self-criticism is difficult. Some seemed to know what was expected of them to say. One interviewee actually seemed to just defend the profession each time I raised questions and another spoke on behalf of the journalism profession. This raises the question of whether journalists or any other professionals can be objective when talking about their profession in retrospect.

It was difficult to get the right number of interviewees as some had already left the field. Some just kept postponing our appointments while some just ended up not responding to my requests. The time of my research (December) also posed a challenge as people were away on holidays and some only came mid-January. I had to wait for them to be available and this delayed my research. Interviews began end of November 2011 and ended around February 2012 as some interviewees were busy. Although I would send questions to

interviewees explaining what my research was about, some only told me that they were not really aware of what I wanted when we met and I was ready to interview.

4: FINDINGS

This chapter is a presentation of the findings that emerged in the interviews on how journalists view and understand their role in covering HIV and AIDS in a changing political situation.

I interviewed eight journalists who covered HIV and AIDS in the new South Africa. Only two covered the Virodene story at its initial stages. The other journalists came into the field after the scandal but covered the HIV and AIDS stories in the period covered by this research. They worked for different newspapers and news organizations. The findings are organised according to themes.

4.1) Virodene saga: From breakthrough to scandal

The story was broken by Sapa on January, 22 1997. Four long pieces were sent to newsrooms from the news agency. It was about a group of researchers who had done research on HIV and AIDS. The research had been presented to cabinet and the researchers received a standing ovation after the presentation. The then deputy president and minister of health backed the researchers. The researchers claimed that they had found a possible cure for HIV which worked faster, cost less and was safer than the available treatment. The Sapa story also had a part in which HIV positive people claimed that their conditions improved significantly after using the Virodene. In another piece the scientists claimed that based on the results, they

could come up with an AIDS vaccine. *The Star* covered it as a daily newspaper and the *Mail and Guardian (M&G)* later covered it as a weekly newspaper. Lesley Cowling (LC) who was the Science Reporter/Editor at the *M&G* and Janine Meyer (JM) who was the medical correspondent at *The Star* gave their experience on reporting on the Virodene story at its initial stages.

Cowling says the first thing she did when she saw the Sapa story was to call the Medical Research Council to ask about the research. They told her that nothing had been published. She also called the experts in the field — the South African Research Institute, National Institute of Virology, University of Cape Town Medical School and the Diamond Aids Research Centre. They all doubted the story. This made her suspicious. As a result, she says, the story was "treated with caution" because despite it sounding good, there seemed to be something missing. The two journalists who covered the story say they remained suspicious even after the government had accepted the scientists' presentation and offered support to the research. When experts told her that there was something missing in the story Cowling says everything "began to look dodgy."

Meyer who was new in the field of journalism at the time and didn't understand HIV and AIDS issues well says she relied on expert information to get to the root of the story. She says it was through this investigation that she began to feel that there was something wrong with the whole research that led to the presentation to cabinet. She attributes this feeling to her professional values.

JM: *As a journalist you have… know that feeling when you add something and you ask questions and then a fact comes out and you just get a feeling that uu! this is interesting or something is not quite right here, I need to understand more and every question you ask builds your understanding…*

Both *The Star* and the *M&G* received the story from Sapa. Both Cowling and Meyer say they just did what they thought they were supposed to do (seeking further information) despite the fact that the HIV story sounded good. They both did this by seeking expert opinion and from that cracks began to open. The two reporters, although from different newspapers serving different groups/markets, mention that what baffled them was the fact that the group had been allowed to present in cabinet.

Cowling describes how the whole process was:

LC: *It was kind of difficult for me because it's a big story, they have gone to cabinet, the president has seen them, the minister of health but on the other hand they have no record of research so I started phoning up people like at the medical health centre and this sort of thing and they were saying to me, "nothing has been published, we have got no records, the scientists here they don't have any publication record. So it began to look dodgy;*

Meyer explains how the cracks began to open in the story;

JM:*…it was a bolt from the blue, it was a process of running around trying to make sense of what had happened and trying to find people who could help explain to us what this thing was and how to respond to it…we were calling people from the States to try and give clarity on the importance of the research and then questions started coming right away, who were these people? Where did they get ethical clearance of the research? What was their sample size? What was their active ingredients?...it became immediately apparent that there were more questions than answers and that it had been presented…it was quite an overwhelming process because we weren't quite sure what was going on…*

Asked if they think the media created the Virodene scandal, the interviewees said they just followed facts and gaps opened and those facts and gaps turned the story into a controversy.

JM: *It was just there to be followed and found out, it was just doing …that's what we were doing and trying to get facts straight*.

This applied to HIV and AIDS reporting in general. Bhungane Mzolo (BM) says when the government was pushing the agenda that HIV did not cause AIDS, he stuck to his guns of wanting to find the truth and report objectively.

BM:*…as a journalist your stories are based on facts. You don't write in theories, as a reporter you report on facts. So one would report on that and you back up your facts with people who know, in other words I mean, for example, let's say you write something about the virus, you get a virologist to talk about the virus so your stories are based on facts not hearsay.*

When the story became a controversy it was taken over by political reporters. Asked if she did follow up stories on Virodene, Cowling pointed out that she did not do political stories; "a lot of the stories I wrote about were a critique of the scientists and a debunking of the scientists". Meyer says her involvement in Virodene was in the first two days and says she feels they did a good job in raising the initial questions and setting the agenda for the story to be taken further; "the story was out there, it was no longer a sort of health specific thing, it was a huge political issue and moved into a broad newsroom and editorial and it was beyond the kind of a beat reporter…". Patrick Bulger (PB) agrees that story moved from being a health story to being a political story "it moved from being a sort of a medical story to being a sort of full blown political controversy, the fact that it was around HIV, obviously that was an issue, but it just became the political story of the day, it just wasn't really even a kind of health story anymore. It became all about power…"

4.2) Impact of personal experiences on HIV and AIDS reporting

Journalists interviewed felt very strongly about HIV and AIDS. Most knew people who were living with the virus or had died from HIV and AIDS.

Kgopotso Bodibe (KB): *We saw the suffering and the pain that was around us, we experienced it in our own families, we experienced it in our own neighbours, we buried family members, we buried our children, we buried our neighbours who actually died because of AIDS related complications. So yes we took a very courageous stance to report on HIV and AIDS and the injustices of the time.*

JM: *I got completely immersed and intrigued in every information that was coming from the rest of the world and Africa about AIDS orphans, about the potential for a social dislocation what was inherent in that…Because really the scale of it was mind boggling to think that you know there was a disease with a potential to kill three out ten people and we don't know what to do and weren't taking it seriously and it was just becoming a political football and the impact of it, the fact that there could be millions of children left without parents and none of that was really upfront…I think we really tried to highlight what the issues were…*

PB: *I think the facts on the ground were obvious, I mean it was obvious that people were dying and this was deemed unnecessary and preventable. I mean that's an issue for journalists and the media…what's happening in society, people are dying and that's something the media would be concerned about….I don't know if this is possible but newspapers are meant to be there to sort of lift people out of ignorance…*

LC: *In addition to that, I had a housemate who had AIDS and who actually died of it. So I knew a lot about it…for me I think HIV/AIDS was a very important issue, people were dying of it at that stage there were no ARVs…so a miracle cure was such a hopeful for our country and if it (Virodene) was a cure …*

CK: *Well I was a human rights activist. I thought it was a huge issue in the new South Africa and that's what I wanted to get out there — knowledge and awareness.*

My interviewees say they also wrote general stories on HIV and AIDS aimed at creating awareness. None of them wrote the story as a scandal. Two of them only wrote the Virodene story when it broke and wrote few follow-ups but stopped as soon as it became a scandal. They say it became political and was taken over by political reporters.

4.2) Journalistic obligation and instincts in HIV and AIDS reporting

The interviewees felt they had an obligation to be socially responsible in writing about HIV and AIDS. They had a common instinct that made them follow up stories. The instinct is common in the way these journalists treated the Virodene story when it broke out and how those who did not cover the Virodene saga view the way it was treated.

Asked why she felt it was important to demystify the science behind the claims that Virodene could treat HIV and AIDS, Cowling says her interests in science as well as wanting to address the imbalance in science education which left the black people out of science issues made her pursue the story further. She explains the difficulties she faced in covering the story:

LC: *…that's a very tricky situation to be in as a journalist because here, the story is out there, it's been done by another journalist, it looks so credible; it looks so credible on the surface…*

Because the story was about HIV and AIDS, an issue that affected the people (human interest), her editor decided that she should followed it up. The *M&G* which catered for an 'elite' readership carried the story while The Star with a middle class readership also carried the story.

Both reporters said the Sapa story was good and agreed that if that was true it would have been a good development for the country but they just felt a need to be careful and do thorough research before publishing. Answering the question on why she went on to investigate the story when researchers had already gone to cabinet and presented their findings and the story had also received positive coverage by Sapa Meyer says, “it was an obvious factual discordance between what the researchers were claiming and what the research profession was saying was due process and ethical procedure and the two just didn’t make up”.

Those who didn’t write the Virodene story agree with those who wrote the story saying it is a basic practice that if a journalist is writing a science story he or she must verify facts. Thom explains, “they are not going to report on anything that has not been proven in a scientific research”.

4.3) HIV and AIDS journalists in the new South Africa

My interviewees had different experiences of working as journalists in the new South Africa as well as different expectations from the new government. The general feel was that things were better than in the old South Africa. There were new developments and all areas in society needed attention. The media had to cover all the developments and among those that needed attention was the issue of HIV and AIDS. The government had its own expectations from the media and vice versa. Most importantly, the people also had expectations. Anso Thom (AT) feels it was unfortunate that the HIV and AIDS pandemic broke out at a time when the country was undergoing transformation and when so many things needed both government and media attention.

AT: *it was a very cruel thing for South Africa that we had to deal with this epidemic. We had other issues that we had to deal with. It was one of the worst things that could ever happen to*

us, nobody wanted this to happen, We would have …(inaudible)… for the world to say here is a miracle, here is the thing that is going to take it away…

None of the interviewees felt any racial pressure to support or be against the government. Most interviewees, on the contrary, admit to feeling a need to give the government a chance to mature, given the fact that it took over from a harsh Apartheid regime.

JM: *I think personally it was very complex what was happening because there was huge shifts in things like free primary health care, I mean there was huge shift in what had been happening, it was a huge restructuring in the system of health care. So it's not like trying to be soft but trying to understand the conceptual thinking behind what people were doing and just to be able to report it in a manner that made sense. I mean I was quite a young reporter then and I was not coming to this with a huge amount of background or anything, it was just as a daily news reporter, trying to be fair, trying to find news but trying to be fair at the same time.*

AT: *Again there was an understanding that this was a new government, you couldn't expect miracles over night and so I think there was a sense of the media being a little bit more forgiving and a little bit more patient in terms of getting things to start happening.*

(KC):*...things got more hectic in 2000 and so when Mbeki was full on AIDS denial but before that you maybe put your own censorship on your own self in a way…by saying well the thing is the new government inherited a mess and it needed to be given a chance to sort that mess out because that was geared only towards serving 20% of the population, now it had to make the resources serve a 100% of the population and really there were no systems, there wasn't even a proper constitution so it was starting from scratch…Well I think any normal person would. It was our first democratic government so you had to understand that for the first time really moving from a military dictatorship to a democracy...one had to take that into*

consideration that it wasn't going to be easy and one couldn't build a new country in two minutes you know, it was going to take time and one had to be patient and try to understand all the competing demands for resources that were facing the government.

PB: *I think everyone did you know when 1994 started, I mean absolutely, maybe this sort of honeymoon didn't last, you know...*

Cullinan said she was an ANC member and therefore actually wanted the government to succeed. This is supported by Bulger who says most journalists he knew at the time would actually have preferred to be ANC supporters to backing the opposition. Keeton said she was in the youth congress and UDF. Only one journalist (Kgopotso Bodibe) said he felt the government owed it to the people to perform even if it was new. He said he felt it was his duty to point out the faults on behalf of the people and he thought by not being soft on the government; he was giving them a chance to see their mistakes.

4.4) Difficulties in dealing with the government spokespeople

After finding out that the researchers had not followed proper procedure, both Cowling and Meyer say they sought government response on the issues but at the time the department of health did not cooperate with journalists. Asked how it was dealing with the government at the time, both reporters said it was not easy to get answers from the government.

LC: …*I remember that at that time the ministry of health was kind of a nightmare to ever get a comment from. There was a reputation with the ministry of health that it was just impossible for them to ever get any clear answers from them and they always asked us to email questions, we would email questions and nothing would ever come back…*

JM: *And the other problem we had was to get hold of the minister and to get a response from the minister because the spokesman at the time if my memory serves me well, It was Vincent,*

I can't remember the surname, but every time, I would put questions about what were the procedures he would say that was not my problem, the researchers do what they do and they just give us the info and it's not our concern what process or procedures they follow and it was hitting your head against a brick wall…

4.5) Journalists' understanding of the science behind HIV and AIDS

Most of my interviewees say they did not understand the science behind HIV and AIDS but had to learn as they went along. Only two journalists say they had a good understanding of HIV and AIDS. Cowling says she had written about HIV and AIDS before and her interest in science made it easy for her to understand the science behind HIV and AIDS. Mzolo had a health background and was specifically employed to write about health issues especially HIV and AIDS. Those who did not have the knowledge of HIV and AIDS had a chance to learn about the disease. They say there was a lot of training from non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders on HIV for health reporters and journalists writing about HIV and AIDS.

AT:…*So journalists that were reporting on HIV for a more prolonged time were actually trained and understood the science...*

JM: *It was easy to learn though if one had an interest.*

CK: *I think everybody made an effort to understand it and the impact policies would have on people.*

4.6) Journalists' perspective of the quality of HIV and AIDS coverage

My interviewees say they feel HIV and AIDS was covered well although they agree that it was a time when there was other news happening all over and that it is common knowledge that editors would want something that boosts newspaper sales. They say the HIV story was covered but only made headlines when it had the potential of making people want to buy the newspapers. However those who concentrated on covering HIV and AIDS stories continued to do so even when the stories were not front page stories.

JM: *The person who taught me about it was Louise Floyd who was working for provincial government on HIV, and I remember doing quite a detailed story with her around the World AIDS Day about who was at risk and we ran it in The Star which I fought for but got placed on page five instead of page three where it was supposed to be…*

These journalists understood why their stories were not making headlines. When asked if they thought the HIV story was taken seriously, most acknowledged the norm that editors needed stories that sold papers and HIV was not such a story unless it was a controversy. Asked if they think HIV and AIDS were taken seriously, the journalists had this to say:

JM: *It is the old age story, it is always easier to sell bad news statistics, it's very difficult for newspapers to play a role in the news part of the newspaper in terms of qualitative useful health information because that's not the function of news…there is a fundamental kind of squeeze between what is news and what is helpful ways of engaging with health vulnerability and they are not necessarily the same thing. So often it would be a kind of a magazine story that would work better in "women pages" because they run more feature stories, but straight news stories no, news about scandals, bad news statistics, it's about anything that's easy and quick.*

AT: *...the point is every journalist in a newsroom knows that the editor wants the scandal, they want a sensation…you want stuff that is going to sell the paper at the end of the day.*

They want stories that are going to draw people's attention. Someone's gotta look at the newspaper and say I want to buy, that's the bottom line. It's a business. A newspaper is not a community nice to have, they are not an NGO, they have to make a profit, and they have to make money. So as much as I a health journalist hate the fact that I also wrote those kind of stories, the point is; I have never in all the years written a story that's not scandalous that's not been published, that's a health story.

PB: *You know we don't sell our newspapers in vacuum, no newspaper sell themselves in a vacuum, to take an issue like AIDS if you like, HIV , you could say at the time mostly white media, for example, firstly saw it as a gay issue…*

The interviewees also point out that despite the many stories that needed media attention at the time; they feel HIV and AIDS were well covered. They say they continued writing about HIV and AIDS despite the story not making headlines. Meyer says she feels HIV and AIDS were well covered.

J**M:** *I carried on working around that field for the last however many years and for me I didn't only write scandals, I got completely immersed and intrigued in every information that was coming from the rest of the world and Africa, about AIDS orphans, about the potential of a social dislocation that was inherent in that and I got quite involved in the comprehensive responses that were being spoken about us (journalists).*

Asked if she thinks HIV and AIDS were well covered Thom says they tried to cover every aspect of health issues at the time, including "the health system that was under a lot of pressure". She says scandals like the Virodene came up and journalists had to write about them.

AT: *There were wrong things, Virodene, Sarafina, those were wrong things happening so we saw it as our role to highlight these things, it was important that we do that but that was not all that we did. We travelled to rural areas, we travelled to other places to show what was happening there and to try and tell people stories and show why it was important that we really start looking into scientifically sound ways to intervene in this epidemic, to tell that there is a human resource shortage, that we need more doctors, we need more nurses to be able to cope with this.*

Asked what she thinks about research that found that journalists only covered HIV as a controversy Thom says health reporters covered general stories on HIV but "when a parliamentary reporter is sitting in a briefing and Manto, (the late former minister of health Doctor Manto Shabalala-Msimang), and she is going on about garlic and beetroot, that is what they report on because at the end of the day they have to make the editor happy and what the editor wants is for the newspaper to sell".

Mzolo says he didn't focus on scandals but continued writing stories about issues affecting people and trying to create awareness on HIV and AIDS. He says the stories included one in which a HIV positive woman was rejected by society because people thought she would infect them and another one where a community in KwaZulu-Natal was against the opening of a shelter for HIV positive children because they thought the children would spread the virus.

Mzolo says he feels health reporters did their best in covering HIV and AIDS because they took the beat at a time when few people took it seriously, when politics was the main beat "but we changed that because today as you know many people are now commenting on HIV…HIV is now in the spotlight and we contributed to that". He says he continued writing

general HIV and AIDS stories when he moved from the *Natal Witness* to the *Sowetan*, touching issues like people being fired because they were HIV positive.

My interviewees feel that what they wrote then contributed to the way HIV and AIDS issues are now being covered. They say the fact that people now understand HIV and AIDS and the current positive government policies are as a result of the way they covered the issue then. They argue that it is easier for people to remember scandals than any other stories.

Asked why she continued writing about HIV and AIDS when the stories didn't make headlines Keeton said she wanted to create awareness about HIV and AIDS; "for me it made perfect sense to concentrate on stuff like that in that context…and that stuff doesn't make headlines".

5: ANALYSIS

5.1) Social Responsibility theory/watchdog role in the Virodene story

In this research that seeks to find out how journalists viewed their role as society's watchdog in reporting HIV and AIDS journalists feel that HIV and AIDS was well covered. Despite feeling the need to play the collaborative role — helping the government find its feet, when it came to the Virodene story, journalists chose to be socially responsible and play the watchdog role by covering facts as they were despite reflecting badly on the government. The two interviewees who wrote the Virodene story at its initial stages say they had to rely on experts to make sense of the story, despite a feeling that if it was true the story would be a good development for the country. There seems to have been something that made them not want to take the story as it was. It is clear that government acceptance and support of the Virodene, when the scientific establishment was raising concerns, made the journalists more adamant to investigate.

It is also clear from the interviews that journalist were faced with a number of competing voices to listen to. There seemed to be a state of conflict, with journalists torn between a number of realities. On the one hand there was the reality of HIV and AIDS killing people by their numbers and journalists having to see this in their everyday lives. They could have wished and wanted what the scientists were saying, about finding a cure, to be true. Some interviewees say people close to them had died of the pandemic while some say they saw people suffering around them. This hope and possibility of a cure, even by the journalists,

was intensified and even affirmed by a number of factors such as government giving the scientists approval and the story also being run in positive light by some news sources like Sapa. On the other hand was the other reality of little knowledge about this "cure" and to some extent, about HIV itself, which led to a deeper investigation that gave way to the realisation that there was more to the story than met the eye. The fact that the journalists pushed hard not only to find the real facts but to publish them is testament to the fact that their sense of obligation to the truth and society was greater than their own personal wishes for a cure or to please government.

These journalists did not take the Virodene story at face value despite the possibility that it could be true that the researchers had found a cure for HIV. Instead of writing the story as it was from the Sapa wires or believing it because it had gone through the deputy president and the minister of health, they went further to interview experts in the field of science. This can also be attributed to the issue of different authoritative voices in news writing. In the case of HIV and AIDS, the scientific voice outweighed the political one hence the health reporters sought clarification from scientists.

Cowling also pointed out that she believed by demystifying the whole issue behind the Virodene story she was contributing to the development of the understanding of science to those previously excluded by the Apartheid regime. In other words, she wanted to help the previously disadvantaged populations to understand science issues. It can be argued that in doing so she gave people an opportunity to understand the science issues which could have helped them make informed decisions on whether to take part in the Virodene experiment or not. Even when she was met with a predicament of having to choose from taking a story that another journalists had written or leaving it, her journalistic professional instincts seemed to have kicked in and she looked for more information.

Those who did not have knowledge of the issue relied on experts to write well informed articles that would give people the opportunity to make informed decisions. Meyer says at the time of the Virodene story, she was still new in the field; however, her professional values seemed to have contributed to her producing a balanced coverage of the story.

The journalists felt it was important to cover HIV and AIDS. They were frustrated because their stories didn't make headlines, but they continued to cover HIV and AIDS because they felt obliged to inform people about HIV and AIDS — playing the social responsibility role. While the journalists felt a need to give the government a chance to mature, this did not stop them from writing HIV and AIDS stories even when the stories reflected badly on the government. It seems the need to inform people about the pandemic and how the government handled it (watchdog role) overpowered the journalists' feeling of wanting to give the government a chance to mature. When playing their social responsibility role by making sure that people were informed about their pandemic, the journalists followed proper channels to get the story. They sought comments from the government, but it seems some of the stories, such as the Virodene story 'naturally' broke into scandals. Journalists did not seem to put an effort to the stories turning into scandals. On the Virodene saga journalists simply followed the story and it turned out to be a scandal.

When the Virodene turned into a scandal, the HIV and AIDS reporters did not focus on the story. They continued writing HIV and AIDS stories while the scandal moved to the political desk. Critics who say journalists created the scandals and that HIV and AIDS was only covered as a scandal may have misunderstood newsroom operations. They may not have understood that as soon as the stories became scandals they moved to the political desk, becoming political stories. While it true that the story made headlines only as a scandal, in the newsroom language it was no longer classified as a general HIV and AIDS story but a political story. Because HIV stories could not sell the newspaper, they were not put on the

first page. This did not stop the HIV and AIDS journalists from writing the stories. The critics on the other hand may not have noticed that the HIV and AIDS story continued to be covered but was overpowered by the bigger now political story. It seems journalists did not feel divided between giving the government a chance to mature and playing the monitorial role or society's watchdog. They held the feeling of wanting to give the government a chance at the back of their minds but when stories broke out, they did not hesitate to be objective — which is why Thom pointed out that she felt it was unfortunate that HIV came at that time (soon after South Africa became a democracy). It appears as if they had no choice but to write the stories. Although my interviewees did not say this, they seemed to have hoped as they wrote the Virodene saga, that the government would see that it was not handling the issue well and correct it. The government however stuck to its approach until it became a scandal. Journalists were left with no choice but inform the public about what was happening. The fact that the reporters who wrote the Virodene story when it broke thought that if it was true, it would have been a good development but still felt they needed to be careful, show that they took their role as society's watchdog seriously. They needed to prove whether the 'good news' was true. Nothing indicates that they created the scandal, in fact, they also wished the story could be true and in trying to get facts the story became a scandal.

5.2) Professional values and practices in the Virodene story

The fact that the story was covered by the *M&G*, a weekly newspaper, that catered for an 'elite' readership and *The Star*, a daily newspaper which catered for a middle class readership also shows that these journalists' ideologies are similar despite operating in different environments and targeting different audiences. The story was chosen from the thousands that were there at the time. The two newspapers made a similar decision to publish the story. This shows that the process of gatekeeping — choosing what news goes into the papers, follows the same process in different news organization. The news values that could have

made the two papers make a decision to run the story may include its human interest — a claim that a cure for a disease that was killing many people has been found, the fact that it sounded like a good news piece and the fact that cabinet had pledged to support the researchers.

The two journalists who covered the Virodene story at its initial stages had similar doubts around the same area. They both felt they needed to find more about the story. They both didn't take the fact that the government had thrown its support behind the research as assurance that the research was done well and had followed procedure. They, instead, relied on expert knowledge until they found a gap between what was said by the researchers and the truth about the Virodene which was actually a deadly solvent.

It seems Meyer's journalistic instincts contributed to her curiosity to find more on the story. In answering the question on why she went on to investigate the story when the researchers had already gone to cabinet and presented their findings, she said it was because the facts between what the researchers were saying and what research experts were saying did not match. This seems to have been common among journalists who wrote about HIV at the time. They used their professional news values to judge and weigh the importance of the story in controlling what went into the newspapers. In this case it led to the exposing of the fact that the researchers' claims were not true and that government had fallen for a false claim. The professional news values and gatekeeping process by these journalists also led to them playing the watchdog by exposing government's fall for a scam. Thom who started writing about HIV and AIDS way after the story broke out agrees with those who wrote the story.

AT: *This was a basic thing when you are in science journalism is that you understand that you are not going to report on anything that has not been proven in a scientific research.*

Now Virodene was clearly not and here we had a government which was willing to say to people go and drink this industrial solvent, let's run trials…

This investigation has provided an illustration of the concrete ways in which professional approaches and values play out in newsrooms. Although they have been blamed for shortfalls in coverage, they also assisted in bringing to the fore an issue that badly needed coverage.

5.3) Objectivity and Truth telling in the Virodene story

Both *The Star* and the *M&G* received the story from Sapa. The ethic of objectivity argues that facts can be separated from values and opinion and journalists act as "neutral transmitters who pass along events to an audience" (Berkowitz 1997: 26). Objectivity calls for journalists to play a facilitative role to ensure the public's right to access facts free from partisan values. It calls for journalists to distinguish facts from values. Journalists play a facilitative role in the debate by not taking sides to make their arguments clear (Cowling and Hamilton: 2007). In this case, reporters who covered the story did not take the Sapa story as it was. They also did not rush to publish the accounts they were hearing from the medical community. Rather they investigated more and sought to get the account of government as well. Despite the potential of the story to boost newspaper sales the journalists decided to analyse it and take a step further to reveal the truth.

Meyer mentions that they were not sure if the story could be trusted while Cowling mentions that one of the dilemmas she faced was that Virodene could actually be a real cure yet on the other hand she sensed something wasn't right. So the only way they managed to cover the story well was to remove their feelings from the story and find facts in order to tell the story truthfully.

In trying to seek government comment, the two journalists may have wanted to balance the story by getting both sides of the story. They both seemed to have been frustrated by the fact that government was not being helpful. This shows how important objectivity was to these journalists. They did all they could to get both sides of the story in order to come up with well-informed stories. They seemed to somehow see themselves as "neutral facilitators" in the process of informing people and help them make informed decision. They got to the truth by mixing expert knowledge, information on the ground and the missing pieces of information. The information on the ground was the claim that a treatment had been found, expert knowledge and the missing link was how and why the government allowed a flawed process to pass through cabinet and more so offer support to the research. Although my interviewees did not cover the story when it became a scandal, they laid a foundation for more follow ups. They raised questions and through that a gap opened. People needed to know why there seemed to be a missing piece to the story. It then became a huge scandal and moved from being a health story to a big political story. This shows that circumstances leading to the Virodene story were controversial and led to the story being the saga that it later became. It seems these journalists felt that the only way they could be fair or sensitive to the new government was to give it a chance to respond to any allegations and set records straight. Keeton explains:

"…giving a fair and balanced coverage doesn't mean concealing the truth, it doesn't mean giving the government a favourable report, I think you have to put all facts but give them a chance to respond."

These journalists felt they were just doing their job when the scandal/controversy of the Virodene automatically came out.

JM: *It was just there to be followed and found out, it was just doing… that's what we were doing and trying to get facts straight.*

However, it would seem that even though the journalists insist that they were propelled by their journalistic instincts to follow the truth, another equally compelling instinct was also at work: the financial, economic imperative that drives their respective media companies to make profits from stories.

AT: *...the point is every journalist in a newsroom knows that the editor wants the scandal, they want a sensation…you want stuff that is going to sell the paper at the end of the day.*

PB: *You know we don't sell our newspapers in vacuum, no newspaper sell themselves in a vacuum …*

JM: *It is the old age story, it is always easier to sell bad news statistics, it's very difficult for newspapers*

Although the journalists sought to uncover the truth for the large, the above statements also prove that they were not oblivious to the possibility to generate large newspaper sales through these stories. It has often been suggested that the journalistic pursuit for truth and objectivity cannot reconcile with the sheer ambition to simply sell sensational stories. Perhaps this is one case where this assumption is proven false.

5.4) Journalists vs. new government

Most interviewees had a self-instilled sense of wanting to give the then new government a chance to mature. This was not forced on them by the government or editors but they felt obliged and had a sense of understanding that there was no handover from the old to the new government. Despite feeling a need to give the new government a chance to mature, these

journalists did not let this affect the way they wrote HIV and AIDS stories. Some journalists belonged to organisations affiliated to the ruling ANC party and say they actually wanted to see the new government succeed but their professional values, applied to the facts before them, were stronger than any sympathies they might have had. Most interviewees say that it was common knowledge that the government could not perform miracles overnight given the history of the country. This answers the question whether journalists despite doing their jobs as expected can't be prone to sympathies that may lead to the tolerance of under-performance. In this case however, as time went on and as government under Mbeki continued with its an AIDS denialism stance, the media took a hardened stance against the government.

5.5) HIV and AIDS understanding among journalists

HIV and AIDS reporting is a specialised field that involves science. For one to be on the beat, he or she must have knowledge of the science behind it. At the period covered by this research HIV and AIDS were a new phenomenon in South Africa. The fact that some of these journalists learnt about HIV and AIDS as they wrote does not seem to have had a negative impact on their reporting because there were platforms to learn about the pandemic. Those who focused on health reporting say the training and courses on HIV helped them understand the science behind HIV and AIDS. Where they did not understand, they relied on experts to give them well informed information. While it is true that the story made headlines only as a controversy, reporters seemed to view the stories that became scandals as political and not health stories. This may explain why journalists say HIV and AIDS were well covered while those with an activist agenda may insist that it was not.

6: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to discover how journalists view the way they reported HIV and AIDS in South Africa's transitional democracy. Previous research claimed that HIV was not given fair coverage as a legitimate health concern unless it was a scandal or a controversy. Most of these reports, however, emanate from researchers and organizations that seem to be driven by activist agendas rather than journalistic judgment. For this reason, most writings and critiques addressing the topic of HIV reporting lack the insights of the very agents behind the stories published at the time — journalists. The title of this study, How Journalists View their Role in HIV and AIDS Reporting in the New South Africa, closes the gap that was left by previous researchers by adding the voice of journalists to the body of research. Eight HIV and AIDS reporters were interviewed to extract first-hand information or narratives about the socio-political and professional conditions that characterized HIV reporting at the time. It examined how HIV/AIDS was reported between 1996 and 1999. It paid particular attention to the Virodene saga — one of the scandals that saw HIV/AIDS making headlines in both local and international newspapers.

The main research questions that this paper set out to answer were: do journalists feel they reported HIV/AIDS stories fairly? Do journalists feel they performed their professional role as watchdogs of the state when reporting on government's handling of HIV/AIDS? Do

journalists feel they lived up to their professional and ethical standards? There were subsidiary questions in each case and these have been addressed in the analysis chapter.

It is clear from the preceding analysis section that journalists believe that they covered HIV and the government' AIDS well; given the tense and fragile political climate at the time, the lack of clarity about the disease and the government's controversial handling of the issue. The journalists pointed out that they did not stop covering ordinary HIV and AIDS stories despite the fact that there were more controversial ones. HIV/AIDS was not considered as less important to the array of other challenges facing South Africa at the time by the journalists.

In answering the second research question, this research found that journalists felt they performed their watchdog role when dealing with the state's handling of the pandemic. This is evident in the fact that highly expositional articles criticizing the government were written by journalists and published by their respective newspapers. This fact however, does not necessarily preclude the journalists' loyalties and sympathies towards the new government. Although all journalists felt that they had a duty to act as watchdogs and report the facts of HIV, they still sympathized with its vulnerable position. Race, they claim, did not contribute to the way they reported issues related to the new government.

Lastly and most interestingly is the answer to the last main research question. Whereas journalists feel that they lived up to their ethical and professional standards in reporting HIV stories and that there was objectivity and the verification of facts, they also admit that the need to write stories that sell newspapers is always part of their jobs as editors always privilege provocative headlines. Even though journalists claim that they did not deliberately create scandals in reporting on HIV and AIDS, the admission of economic organizational

pressures means that they know that they and their media companies benefited from these highly controversial stories.

This research found that none of the eight interviewees wrote about the Virodene story as a scandal. They also did not intentionally turn the story into a scandal. It just turned out into a controversy as they dug deeper into the story. However, as soon as the story became a scandal it moved to the political desk and those who wrote about HIV and AIDS continued focusing on the issue. The perspective of the interviewed journalists provides a more nuanced account of HIV and AIDS reporting after 1994. Perhaps, this was one case where journalists were absolutely justified to treat HIV and AIDS as a scandal, since that is what it was, and it held government accountable.

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