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

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ABSTRACT

HIV and AIDS came into the national spotlight as soon as the ANC government took over from the Apartheid regime in South Africa and media coverage of the pandemic has attracted considerable attention. This research investigates how journalists view the way they covered HIV and AIDS in the new South Africa — after 1994. This was a time when the journalism profession was faced with a wide range of expectations including educating people about their rights, exposing the escalation of crime and corruption, reporting on service delivery and promoting social cohesion or transformation. Arguably, this was also a time when the government expected the media to help it build new social cohesiveness and be less critical of its shortcomings. The research investigates how journalists handled the interplay of news values, journalistic practices and political pressures of HIV/AIDS reporting after 1994. Careful attention is given specifically to the period of 1996 to 1999 since this period was marked by many HIV and AIDS controversies. The Virodene saga, one of the scandals that saw HIV and AIDS making headlines at the time, is used as the primary case study of this investigation. This study uses the social responsibility theory as the main theoretical framework. The theory states that the media has an obligation to educate and inform people; thereby playing a monitorial or watchdog role — making sure the government is accountable to the people who voted it in. The research used in-depth interviews with eight journalists who covered HIV and AIDS in the new South Africa to get their views on the issue and a brief content analysis to understand how HIV and AIDS scandals broke and how journalists handled them. Though previous research shows that HIV and AIDS was not well covered and only made headlines when the story was a controversy, findings in this study challenge these notions. The research found that despite feeling the need to give the government a chance to mature (collaborative role), journalists chose to play the social responsibility or watchdog role in HIV reporting by covering facts despite this reflecting badly on the government. The

paper also points out that the Virodene story ‘automatically’ turned into a scandal and in newsroom terms, became a political story, not an ordinary a health story. Although journalistic professional values have been criticised for causing journalists to favour certain issues over others, in this case they exposed government’s shortfalls and averted a potentially disastrous situation. This research not only positions itself to offer deep understanding of the sensitive issue of HIV and AIDS reporting but also offers insights into the very ethos of the journalism profession itself.

Key words: HIV and AIDS reporting, new democracy, journalists, Virodene saga, watchdog role, Social responsibility