

POLITICS AND HIV AND AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA REPORTING DURING THE PRESIDENCY OF THABO MBEKI (1999-2008)

by
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Citizen, Mankahlana branded the *Science* article a “complete fabrication”, but *Science* magazine news editor Colin Norman said Mankahlana’s answers were tape-recorded in an interview in his office on March 24 and he would be happy to play it to anyone (including Mankahlana) who wanted to hear it.

5.2.5 Parks Mankahlana’s death

On October 26, the Presidency announced the death of Mankahlana at the age of 36 and all indications were that he had died of HIV (Malan, 2003: 101). The TAC responded to the government’s announcement by calling on them “to tell the truth” about Mankahlana’s death, and to publicly acknowledge that a number of senior government officials were HIV positive (Dempster, 2000). On 27 October the *Mail & Guardian* reported that Mankahlana had died of AIDS, citing an anonymous senior ANC official (Journalism Ethics – a Global Debate, 2003). According to the report, Mankahlana’s strong AIDS dissident stance had “made the cause of Mankahlana’s death a public domain issue” (Journalism Ethics – a Global Debate, 2003: 22).

Kerry Cullinan, managing editor of Health-e News Service, states that it took the death of Mankahlana to “awaken the South African media to the intricacies of reporting on HIV/AIDS” (Cullinan, 2001: 35). According to Cullinan (2001) there were mainly two views in the media after his death: journalists like *The Star*’s Lizeka Mda, who appealed for other journalists to respect the dead and chastised them for not asking Mankahlana his HIV status while alive; and *Business Day*’s Jim Jones, who emphasised the fact that Mankahlana had two child maintenance cases against him and was “promiscuous”.

The International Centre for Journalists points out that, for many reporters in South Africa, the question of stigma and privacy are superseded by the political dimension when a public official in President Mbeki’s government dies of AIDS (Journalism Ethics – a Global Debate, 2003: 22). On 29 October, journalist Ranjeni Munusamy pointed out in *The Sunday Times* that Mankahlana’s “battle with his illness became mixed up with the battle he was fighting on Mbeki’s behalf. And he lost both” (Journalism Ethics – a Global Debate, 2003: 22-23).

5.2.6 The battle for Nevirapine

The media coverage of the legal battle between the government and the TAC to provide MTCTP to pregnant HIV-positive women clearly supported the TAC and opposed the government (Spurr, 2005). According to a study by the Perinatal HIV and Research Unit at the University of Witwatersrand Journalism Program (Finlay, 2004), coverage of AIDS also skyrocketed during the litigation.

The TAC had already threatened legal steps regarding treatment for HIV-positive pregnant women during the 2000 AIDS Conference in Durban, and it certainly did not help the government's "case" when the Health Minister rejected free Nevirapine. During the Conference, Boehringer Ingelheim had offered to provide Nevirapine to government MTCTP programmes free of charge for five years, but the Health Minister still argued that the drug was not safe (Nattrass, 2007: 188). *Beeld* published a report that stated that Tshabalala-Msimang had postponed pilot projects in March 2001, and then referred the projects to the cabinet in April (Liebenberg, 2001: 4). In this article, TAC member Cati Vawda stated that the TAC and the public were "in the dark" about the government's plans with the pilot projects after the Health Minister handed over the decision to the government. According to a comment during a press conference by Promise Mthembu, a member of the TAC, the government also did not reply to a letter sent by the TAC, requesting the details of the pilot projects.

The government kept dragging its feet on the MTCTP pilot projects and, on 21 August 2001, the TAC filed a motion in the Pretoria High Court "to compel the Health Minister and provincial MECs for Health to make Nevirapine available for MTCTP in the public sector" (Nattrass, 2007: 190). The state argued that it already had 18 pilot sites that could not be expanded because of a lack of resources and once again questioned the efficacy and safety of Nevirapine (Malan, 2003: 80).

On 22 August the daily newspaper *Die Burger* reported national TAC coordinator Zackie Achmat's statement that the government had not released the findings of a study that found that a programme to prevent mother-to-child transmission would be the cheaper

On 19 May 2006, Bhengu died of AIDS at the age of 32 (Geffen, 2010: 104). On 24 May the TAC issued a statement stating “Nozipho Bhengu’s death shows the urgent need for science, truth, leadership and personal responsibility to lead the HIV and AIDS response” (Geffen, 2010: 104). In the statement the TAC also said that they held Tine van der Maas partially responsible for Nizopho’s death and they called on Tshabalala-Msimang to have Tine van der Maas and other quacks arrested.

According to Geffen (2010: 104), this “set off a furore” with the government because it was “culturally taboo in South Africa to talk in a controversial way about the dead”.

According to Geffen (2010: 4) a number of journalists told him that they thought the TAC’s statement was callous. But the *Mail & Guardian* supported the TAC by writing: “The *Mail & Guardian* respects and sympathises with the family’s grief over the AIDS related death last week of Nozipho Bhengu ... But there is inescapable truth in (TAC’s) charge that the tragedy can be laid at the doorstep of Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and her AIDS muse, the dangerous Dutch crank Tine Van der Maas” (Dangerous quackery, 2006: 22).

Critical media coverage of Tshabalala-Msimang, generated mostly by the TAC, reached an all-time high during the 2006 Toronto international AIDS conference. Natrass (2007: 174) pointed out that the TAC “was very successful at mobilising international support and coordinating it with domestic protest”, which was exactly what the TAC did during the 2006 conference.

On the international front the *Mail & Guardian* reported on 17 August 2006 that “TAC members protested at the South African stand at the conference” where the Health Minister was promoting garlic, lemon and beetroot (Blandy, 2006). Blandy wrote: “Geffen clashed with exhibition organisers when he tried to remove garlic from the stand”.

Two days later *Beeld* reported that 43 TAC members, as well as TAC leader Zackie Achmat, had been arrested because of an unlawful protest in front of the Cape Town provincial health offices while chanting the words “Arrest Manto” (O’Connor, 2006: 4).

According to the report, Achmat commented that the TAC would do everything in its power to see that the Health Minister lost her job.

On the closing day of the conference, UN special envoy on AIDS in Africa, Stephen Lewis, criticised Tshabalala-Msimang's pseudoscience and South Africa's poor performance on the rollout of antiretrovirals, reported *Die Burger* (O'Connor, 2006: 2). *Die Burger* also reported that Achmat's response to Lewis's lambasting speech was that Mbeki must now explain why he was keeping Tshabalala-Msimang on as minister of health. Nattrass (2007: 177) pointed out that this embarrassment for the South African government was facilitated by sympathy towards the media. Anton Harber (2006: 15), co-founding editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, wrote:

Those newspapers that bravely spoke out in the last few years against government policy and inactivity on HIV – and withstood the pressure to fall into line on this matter – deserve a pat on the back ... TAC would not have had much impact without the extensive media coverage they have received; and the international attitude to our country's policies would be unknown without those who brought it to our attention in these newspapers. A special mention belongs to those reporters and their editors who told us what they saw at the South African stand at the recent Toronto AIDS conference – apparently a turning point in our government's attitude on the issue.

5.2.8 The criticism of Mbeki continues

In 2003, Mbeki's State of the Nation Address on 14 February started evoking critical media coverage because of what he said (or did not say) about HIV and AIDS, as he mentioned AIDS only in passing. On 15 February *Die Burger* reported that, while 10 000 people were protesting in a TAC march for AIDS treatment outside Parliament, the president only mentioned AIDS once after he mentioned that tuberculosis was the biggest killer in South Africa (Mbeki sê min oor vigs, Zim, 2003: 1). The *Daily Dispatch* took it a step further in an editorial piece: "President Mbeki's brush-off of the killer disease that will claim hundreds of thousands of lives this year has wounded activists, pleading for an

urgent national treatment plan and an HIV and AIDS charter. And puzzled everyone” (Baragwanath vs Baghdad, 2003: 9). The *Daily Dispatch* further referred to his brief mentioning of HIV as “brief, general comments” that would “reinforce perceptions that he refuses to see the writing on the wall and is unwilling, or lacks the courage, to tackle the crisis head-on” (Baragwanath vs Baghdad, 2003: 9).

After Mbeki’s 2004 Address, *Business Day* carried a report titled “Mbeki skirted top three issues”, referring to the fact that he did not mention the three biggest threats, namely HIV/AIDS, crime and the crisis in Zimbabwe (Hartley, 2004: 9). According to the article, HIV/AIDS was mentioned once and there was no mention of the rollout of antiretroviral drugs.

In 2005 the president’s State of the Nation Address once again evoked critical media coverage. The *Sunday Argus* reported in February 2005 that Statistics South Africa’s Mortality and Causes of Death in South Africa report showed that the adult death rate had soared by 62% from 1997 to 2002 (Hooper-Box, 2005: 2). In the same article, statistician-general Pali Lehohla explained that the data “provided indirect evidence that the HIV epidemic in SA is raising the mortality levels of prime-aged adults, and associated diseases are on the increase” (Hooper-Box, 2005: 2). The TAC commented that the death toll could be combated with the MTCTP programmes and the rollout of antiretroviral medicines. *News24* reported that Mbeki mentioned South Africa’s “comprehensive” AIDS programmes and the “greater vigour” with which the government was fighting AIDS, without acknowledging that ARV treatment targets had not been met (SA ‘stepping up’ AIDS fight, 2005). The TAC responded by pointing out that only about 20 000 people were receiving ARVs, when the president said in his previous State of the Nation Speech that 53 000 people would be receiving ARVs from state-accredited health centres by March 2005.

In 2006 scientists across the world demanded answers from Mbeki for his Health Minister’s blunders. On 6 September 2006 *Beeld* carried an article about the letter to Mbeki from 60 scientists across the world in the field of HIV and AIDS, in which they demanded that he fire Tshabalala-Msimang immediately (Louw, 2006: 3). According to

Nattrass (2007: 178), Geffen of the TAC helped to draft the letter and to mobilise signatories.

The Health Minister was not fired, nor did she resign. *The Sunday Times* published an open letter to President Mbeki from the TAC on 30 September 2007, noting the details of two letters being sent to the President before getting a reply a year after the first letter had been sent (Dear Mr President, 2007: 21). In the TAC's first letter they explained in great detail "the areas in which the minister of health has failed in her constitutional duties". The TAC sent another letter to the President's office on 24 August 2007, requesting reasons for retaining Tshabalala-Msimang after the President's office publically requested "evidence of her failure to do her duty". The letter stated further the TAC's deep regret about the office's reply, which was: "there is no constitutional obligation on the part of the President to furnish reasons" for the "continued retention of Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang in office as Minister of Health" (Dear Mr President, 2007: 21).

5.2.9 The 'Madlala-Routledge factor'

In October 2006 Tshabalala-Msimang was on sick leave because of liver and lung problems, and this provided "(Nozizwe) Madlala-Routledge (Deputy Minister of Health) with the opportunity to change the Health Ministry's discourse on AIDS" (Nattrass, 2007: 172). The "Madlala-Routledge factor", as Nattrass put it, resulted in critical media coverage, domestically as well as internationally, for Mbeki and his Health Minister.

In December 2006 *The Telegraph* in London reported in an article titled "African minister ends decade of denial on AIDS" that Madlala-Routledge had publically admitted for the very first time that the South African government had been "in denial at the very highest level" over AIDS (Bevan, 2006). According to *The Telegraph*, Madlala-Routledge had also criticised those who had promoted traditional medicines as an alternative drug treatment in an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* and made it clear that her criticism included Mbeki and Tshabalala-Msimang. The Health Minister hit back from her hospital bed with a letter on the ANC website, stating that her illness had been seen as an opportunity to turn others into champions of a campaign to rid the government

of so-called “HIV and AIDS denial at the highest level” (Manto rejects deputy’s damning report, 2007).

In July 2007, Tshabalala-Msimang rejected Madlala-Routledge’s report on infant deaths at the Frere Hospital in East London, and it was reported in the *City Press* on 27 July that the TAC had called for the minister to be sacked and replaced by her deputy (Manto rejects deputy’s damning report, 2007). On the same day, Mbeki posted a letter on the ANC website in which he implied that Madlala-Routledge and others “were all colluding in falsifying neonatal fatality statistics and lying” about the conditions at Frere Hospital (Robins, 2007: 9). The *Cape Times* referred to this as the “latest phase in the stats wars”, and said it seemed like a re-run of the president’s earlier clashes over AIDS, crime and rape statistics (Robins, 2007: 9).

On the eve of Women’s Day the Deputy Minister of Health was fired by Mbeki with immediate effect because of her inability to work as part of a collective and for undertaking a trip to an AIDS conference in Spain without Mbeki’s consent (Madlala-Routledge forced to pay for Spain trip, 2007). The TAC was outraged and Heywood responded in the *Mail & Guardian*, saying “we think Mbeki does not tolerate it when Cabinet Ministers speak out publicly about government inefficiency” (Madlala-Routledge was set up, 2007). On 27 August 2007 the *Mail & Guardian* reported that the TAC had launched a fund to provide “short-term financial assistance” to the fired Deputy Minister of Health and wrote a letter to Mbeki asking him to reinstate her and fire Tshabalala-Msimang (TAC starts support fund for Madlala-Routledge, 2007).

Madlala-Routledge’s dismissal also generated criticism internationally. On 10 August *The Independent* in London carried an article titled “A president in denial, a ravaged nation denied hope”, pointing out that “Thabo Mbeki’s stance on AIDS has left South Africa with the world’s worst HIV epidemic. Yesterday, he silenced the woman fighting to end the suffering of millions” (referring to Mbeki firing Madlala-Routledge) (Pahad, 2007: 9). The government’s reaction to this negative publicity came in the form of Essop Pahad, Minister in the Presidency, writing an article which was published in the *Cape Times* a few days later (Pahad, 2007: 9). Pahad called the *Independent* article an attempt

to use a “domestic event to rubbish the stance of the Mbeki government on HIV and AIDS”, saying it was “far-fetched” and “ridiculous”.

5.2.10 ‘Second-generation denialism’

On 21 August 2007 the controversy surrounding Health-Minister Tshabalala-Msimang led to *Business Day* carrying an article titled “Spin, facts and untruths in the new season of denialism” (Tregrove-Jones, 2007: 11). According to the article Mbeki had defended his Health Minister in his online newsletter for two successive weeks, attacking the media and insisting that the media apply their minds to “facts”. According to Tregrove-Jones (2007: 11), “attacks on the media are standard in contemporary government discourse and embody a tendency to beat the messenger bringing bad news”. Later in the article the President was accused of “second-generation denialism” because he was denying a history of denialism that had taken place over the previous few years. The article also stated that evidence of denialism was found in the fact that the rollout of MTCTP, as well as ARV, was embarked upon only when the TAC took the government to court.

5.2.11 Mbeki’s resignation – the end of AIDS denialism?

Nattrass (2007: 184) wrote at the end of her book, *Mortal combat: AIDS denialism and the struggle for antiretrovirals in South Africa*, that “only when science is firmly re-established as the benchmark for AIDS treatment will its ghost finally be exorcised”.

On 21 September 2008, President Mbeki handed in his letter of resignation (Mbeki resigns before the nation, 2008). Mbeki’s resignation led to Tshabalala-Msimang’s move to the president’s office, “thus ending her rule as one of the most controversial and destructive cabinet ministers” (Cullinan, 2008).

The media and the TAC responded very positively towards a new Health Minister. On 25 September 2008 an article titled “New Health Minister means end of government AIDS denialism” was published on *health-e* (Cullinan, 2008). According to the article the appointment of Barbara Hogan as Minister of Health and Dr Molefi Sefularo as Deputy Minister of Health marked the end of “the period of politically supported AIDS

denialism”. The TAC’s Zackie Achmat commented: “We are confident that Hogan has the ability to improve the South African health system. She has been one of the few Members of Parliament to speak out against AIDS denialism and to offer support to the TAC, even during the worst period of AIDS denialism by former President Thabo Mbeki and former Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang” (Cullinan, 2008).

On 13 October 2008 the *Mail & Guardian* reported positively when Hogan appealed to scientists to intensify efforts to find an AIDS vaccine: “Her speech on Monday marked a radical break in policy from her predecessor, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang” (Intensify fight against AIDS, says Health Minister, 2008).

On 17 October 2008 the *Mail & Guardian* expressed its relief about a new Minister of Health in an op-ed piece titled “At last, an end to the lemons”: “In a month our health regime has moved from folly and despair to hope and commitment” (At last, an end to the lemons, 2008). However, the newspaper still did not trust government completely after the “regime” of Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, which “existed in a bunker of opprobrium and arrogance, its officials serving a deathly ideology of denial, listening only to a president who sacrificed his people on the altar of loony science” (At last, an end to the lemons, 2008). The article stated: “We hope Hogan makes the Cabinet cut after next year’s election. The health system deserves such a servant.”

The Sunday newspaper *Rapport* referred to the new Minister of Health as a “small politician” who was not scared of the problems that would be facing her in the department of health on 21 October 2008 (Hogan wil siek SA stelsel gesond kry: Reuse-taak lê voor vir klein vrou-tjie in groot ministerstoel, 2008).

5.3 Conclusion on media reporting

Robins (2007: 9) points out that, because they supported AIDS dissidents and questioned AIDS statistics, the viral aetiology and the safety and efficacy of anti-retroviral treatment, Mbeki and Tshabalala-Msimang were “portrayed in the media as misguided, irrational and irresponsible”. The opposite holds for the media’s view of those holding an orthodox AIDS position: “... the mainstream scientific establishment, which is shared by most

medical professionals, activists, academics and journalists, is usually presented as rational, scientific and self-evident” (Robins, 2007: 9).

This fact, that media reporting mostly was positive towards AIDS activists like the TAC and negative or critical towards Mbeki and Tshabalala-Msimang, was also evident in the content analysis of media reporting on HIV during the Presidency of Mbeki.

Some believe that the coverage of conflict around the HIV policy resulted in the absence of the broad analytical role that is supposed to be played by the media, and that the media failed “as a proactive, informed interlocutor in the conflict” (Finlay, 2004: 70).

Jacobs and Johnson (2007: 119) concluded in their study:

We argue that while it was inevitable, that key leadership within the South African government’s controversial stances on HIV and AIDS was bound to dominate media coverage the media not only trivialized coverage of the epidemic or encouraged sensational or factual incorrect reporting, but, more importantly, obscured and prevented public debate of the HIV/AIDS epidemic beyond a sensational, misguided conflict-driven ‘debate’ between government and social movements over the causes of HIV/AIDS.

Geffen (2010: 189) explains that the effort made by the TAC with the media resulted in the media’s critical stance towards government and positive attitude towards the TAC:

We had a well-run national campaign that made effective use of the media and the courts ... We also put a lot of effort into our relationship with the media, organising hundreds of interviews between journalists and TAC members. We gave workshops explaining HIV science to reporters. We would spend hours explaining our court cases and actions, such as our highly controversial civil disobedience campaign. This reaped rewards. Most journalists were highly critical of Mbeki and very favourable to the TAC.

According to Malan (2003: 110), dissident responses from government led to counter-responses from the TAC, “ensuring orthodox viewpoints received consistent coverage”. This may imply that the public was constantly scientifically educated about HIV, which would not have been the case if the conflict had not existed between the two parties.

The resignation of President Mbeki, which also led to the re-assignment of Health Minister Tshabalala-Msimang, meant a new Minister of Health for South Africa and marked a change in media coverage of HIV/AIDS. The media reported more positively about the HIV policy because it meant “the end of government AIDS denialism” (Cullinan, 2008).

5.4 Journalists’ side of the story

The researcher sent out questionnaires to seven journalists who reported on health during the time of Mbeki’s Presidency (1999 to 2008). Four journalists completed the questionnaire.

The objective of the questionnaire was to explore possible reasons for the media’s attitude to HIV communication by the government during that time, and why journalists mostly reported critically on the government’s HIV policy.

5.4.1 Limitations

This study only captures the understandings and responses of some health journalists. Some of the respondents were health reporters only during a certain period of Mbeki’s Presidency. There is no doubt that other opinions and understandings exist that warrant further study.

5.4.2 Discussion of the results from the questionnaires completed by health journalists

These results provide reasons for the conclusion drawn from the content analysis of media reporting, namely that health journalists during Mbeki's Presidency mostly reported critically on the government, and that the mainstream media were more sympathetic towards activist groups (especially the TAC) than towards government.

The four journalists who completed the questionnaire were Journalist A (JA), a journalist for the SABC from 1999 to 2002; Journalist B (JB), a health journalist for *Die Burger* from 2001 to 2004; Journalist C (JC), a freelance journalist for various publications on health issues during Mbeki's Presidency; and Journalist D (JD), a health journalist for *Beeld* since 2001.

The main reasons for the journalists' critical reporting on the government's HIV policy are discussed within the context of various categories which emerged from their completed questionnaires.

A The government's communication on HIV from 1999 to 2008

All the respondents felt that the communication from government on HIV was poor:

“It was always a struggle to get hold of the Health Minister” (JA).

“As far as I remember Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's spokesperson was Sibani Mngadi, and there was an internal joke among health journalists that he almost never calls back. However, the Western Cape's Department of Health was in the capable hands of Dr Fareed Abdullah, who was Deputy Director General of health in this department. Abdullah regularly held press conferences, communicated with journalists and I could make an appointment with him at any time and walk into his office” (JB).

“Poor, denialist and defensive most of the time” (JD).

There was a stronger opinion that there was absolutely no communication:

“What communications? It was led by the President and Health Minister’s insulting position on AIDS and by that I mean the ways they insulted those ill with the virus, journalists and NGO’s under Mbeki. It improved once Zuma came in and Aaron Motsoaledi took over, his approach was completely different, but communications from the health department have always been sub-par, they have tended to employ PRs who are lax about getting back to journalists, rarely pro-active, and not cognisant of the fact that they were there to serve the people of SA and not just ministerial bosses” (JC).

B Better relationship with AIDS activists than government

According to some of the respondents it was clear that the journalists had better relationships with AIDS activists (especially the TAC) than with government, for various reasons:

“A murky area is that I think journalists who reported on HIV had much closer relationships with HIV activists than they would have had had Mbeki and Manto not advocated against science. I don’t think it necessarily interfered with my reporting, but I think “advocated reporting” (for science) was quite accepted by journalists at the time, as it happened amongst extraordinary circumstances” (JA).

“A lot of what happened in the National Department of Health was communicated to us by the TAC, with which I and a lot of other journalists had regular contact” (JB).

“The TAC focused on the science and human rights, not on getting the votes, political positioning and snake oil like the Department of Health did” (JD).

C Pressure from government

Some of the respondents felt pressure from the government not to be critical towards the President and his Health Minister:

“I didn’t feel pressure until Snuki Zikalala became the head of news. I once reported on Mbeki (yet again) not turning up at a World AIDS Day event, and got comments from HIV activists on it. After having done a radio report on it, I started filing for the TV evening news bulletin. I think someone from government must have phoned Snuki, because he came into the editing studio along with a manager, refused for the bulletin editor, who had cleared the story, to enter the studio, and forced me to remove the comments from the activists, stating: it’s unfair to criticise the president while he’s not in the country. At the Durban 2000 international HIV conference I had to closely liaise with one of my editors to ensure my (critical) reports were broadcast. We basically had to bypass Snuki. Other than that, I can’t recall not getting stuff broadcast. I did critical after critical report about both Manto and Mbeki” (JA).

“A number of editors stopped using my writing because Mbeki or Frank Chikane would call them and lambast them for using my work. Nazeem Howa was one of them. He was general manager at Independent Newspapers; he placed a ban on the use of my stories if they were about rape or HIV, as one example. Many editors were apologetic, yet others simply stopped using me. *Sunday Independent* continued trying to use me but it was challenging for them because of Mbeki's attacks. Former Anglican Archbishop Njabulo Ndungane, as one example, called me once and told how Chikane asked if I had indeed interviewed him for a piece in *You* magazine in which I quoted Ndungane as saying Mbeki was 'over-sensitive' when it came to HIV, something like that. Ndungane said I had quoted him correctly, Chikane asked him to issue a press statement saying I was lying. Ndungane refused to do it, and informed me. The same call was made to William Makgoba by Mbeki about the same article, he too confirmed I had quoted him

accurately, he too refused to issue a statement against me, and he too called and informed me” (JC).

“The journalists were often insulted by Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang if they asked critical questions” (JD).

D How the government influenced journalists’ reporting

There is an opinion that Mbeki and his Health Minister’s dissident views had a positive effect on journalists’ reporting:

“The positive side of their comments was that journalists were forced to become scientifically literate about HIV – otherwise they wouldn’t understand the debate. Activist organisations such as the TAC and the AIDS Law Project (now Section 27) were excellent at using almost every incorrect statement by the president or Health Minister as an opportunity to educate journalists, and, in effect the media” (JA).

Others, however, feel differently:

“When looking back, we journalists maybe did not put enough effort into it to tell both sides of the story – mostly because it was so difficult to reach the National Department of Health and others made it so easy for the media. That said, the National Department of Health was openly antagonistic towards the media, although it may have been our own fault” (JB).

5.4.3 Conclusion on results from questionnaires

Finlay (2004: 88) argues that, while Tshabalala-Msimang and Mbeki have been critical of the media, “the compliment has been returned”. Finlay (2004: 88) states:

One needs only to consider the satirical use of the Health Minister's first name ('Manto') in news headlines to see the extent to which the antagonism precedes any contextual assessment of content. Although 'Manto' is better for letter count in headlines (preferable, that is, to the minister's long surname), its use serves a constant reminder to of her infamous exchange with 702 talk show host in 2000, where she objected to being addressed by her first name ... The exchange served to entrench the caricature of a Health Minister inaccessible and aloof to the needs of the common people.

The results of the content analysis of media reports verifies that journalists were mostly critical or negative towards government and positive towards the TAC during Mbeki's Presidency. The journalists' completed questionnaires also seem to verify this. The following reasons for this are evident from the results:

- Communication on HIV/AIDS, especially by the National Department of Health, was poor.
- Journalists had better relationships with AIDS activists, especially the TAC, because they went out of their way to communicate with journalists.
- Journalists were pressured by government not to be critical towards government in their HIV reporting, but this made journalists antagonistic towards the government.
- Dissident views by the government caused counter-responses from the TAC, which resulted in critical reporting on government.
- The government was openly antagonistic towards the media, which resulted in critical reporting.
- The HIV policies of the government of Mbeki and his Health Minister were blatantly in contrast to scientific evidence and also medically unethical, which is why it was the media's duty to fulfil their watchdog and surveillance of the environment role and to be very critical about those policies in the interest of the public.

APPENDIX

Questions posed to health journalists regarding HIV reportage

1. How did you find the government's communication on HIV during 1999-2008?
2. Were you able to stay objective in your HIV reporting, despite the controversies?
3. Do you feel that Mbeki's dissidence indirectly negatively affected the public's view on HIV and AIDS?
4. Do you think journalists were still able to "educate" the public on HIV and AIDS, despite Mbeki and his Health Ministers' dissident actions?
5. Did you ever feel pressure from your editor not to be critical towards the government when reporting on HIV and the government's policy?
6. Did you ever feel pressure from the government not to be critical towards the government when reporting on HIV and the government's policy?

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