



UNSPEAKABLE WORDS REMAIN UNSPOKEN

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Censorship is a violation of the human right to free expression and a serious offence to democracy. For obvious reasons, governmental bodies that suffocate opinion by controlling editorial content are internationally condemned. A much less debated but frequently practiced way of confining freedom of expression is done by journalists themselves. Self-censorship is widespread. Instead of developing their critical approach to governments in the power, they become hypersensitive to political climates and unspoken rules.

In the light of what recently happened to one of few independent journalists in Russia, Ms. Anna Politkovskaja, who paid with her life for defying the current regime with her sharp and critical pen, it is understandable, although not desirable, that writers develop a strategy to perform their job without offending the political leaders.

However, self-censorship is not always practiced for fear of an undemocratic regime, but rather for comfort and an alleged respect for culture. That this may be the case struck me while I collected material for my master thesis in Communication for Development in eastern Africa, back in 2001. The thesis focused on HIV/AIDS communication in Tanzania; primarily, how journalists within mainstream media report about the epidemic.

Tanzania is seriously affected by the epidemic, with an official HIV-prevalence rate of 7 per cent. For many years, HIV/AIDS was met with silence and denial. By the time I conducted my fieldwork, the government had recognized the seriousness of the situation. Tanzania had just developed its first national policy on HIV/AIDS. The document described the epidemic as a catastrophe, explicitly stating that media should play a leading role in educating the public on HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS = STIGMA AND TABOO

Although the epidemic was officially recognized, the disease as such was - and still is- surrounded with shame, prejudice, discrimination, taboos and

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stigma. HIV/AIDS communication is not an easy task. Nevertheless, media are an important gatekeeper. If they take the task seriously and want to contribute to raising awareness around HIV/AIDS, they need to address the main cause of the epidemic: the fact that people engage themselves in sexual relations. This is tricky in any cultural setting. Sexuality belongs to the most private sphere, something rarely discussed outside the bedroom walls. Addressing the HIV-epidemic requires that the most private sphere becomes public.

Not least significant, HIV/AIDS communication does raise questions about language use. How do you put sensitive issues on print or speak them out on air? The answer is not obvious.

Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, in *Combating AIDS/Communication Strategies in Action*, explain how anxious newsrooms in the USA were when they started reporting about AIDS back in the 1980s. “Reporters could not use terms like ‘anal intercourse’, ‘swallowing semen’, ‘fisting’ or ‘rimming’” (2003:84). At first, media reported that the virus was transmitted among gay men through “exchange of body fluids”. People got confused. Eventually, reporters started calling things by their right names. They were criticized for doing it, but as one of the reporters at *The Los Angeles Times*, Ms. Marlene Cimonis put it, “Words don’t kill... but can save lives” (ibid).

In a much less sexually liberated context like Tanzania, where it has traditionally been taboo to talk about sex, this becomes even more complex. In 2001, the language used by media workers in relation to HIV and sexuality became a central preoccupation of my thesis.

NEWS ABOUT DISEASE AND DEATH

I conducted my fieldwork between September and October 2001. At that time, news reporting all over the world, including Tanzania, was still dominated by the terrorist attack against the USA. Apart from that, HIV/AIDS stories were to be read frequently in the Tanzanian newspapers. Almost every day there were articles about the epidemic, focussing on figures and the latest statistics: drops in life expectancy, and death rates.

Common to many of these stories was the lack of a grass roots perspective. I specifically remember one of such articles, headlined “Dar girls ready to sign contract against promiscuity”. The story was about the wife of the then president, Mrs. Mkapa, who had managed to make 6,000 school girls agree not to involve themselves in sexual intercourse. The

story indirectly implied that girls in particular have a certain responsibility for not spreading the virus. The article failed to see sexuality in a social, cultural, economic and emotional context. Most importantly, it failed to inquire into what the girls themselves thought of the initiative.

In this context, the *Femina* magazine stood out as something different. *Femina* is a glossy colourful youth magazine, targeting young women and men 15 to 30 years old. It follows an entertainment-education strategy, mixing purely entertaining articles and attractive pictures with sexual reproductive health information. People corresponding to the readership's age group frequently appear in its pages, both celebrities and ordinary boys and girls. Unlike mainstream media, *Femina* does not talk about the epidemic in terms of death and disease. It recognizes that young people engage themselves in sexual relations. In its view, if they cannot abstain, they need to know how to practice safer sex.

The *Femina* magazine is part of the broader Femina Health Information Project, primarily funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). It was launched in 1999 and soon became extremely popular. Young people enjoyed the magazine and its real life stories, accompanied by useful information on how to protect themselves against Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). A general opinion in evaluations was that such information could not be found anywhere else. Behind the attractive and easily digested messages lies a thorough work. The magazine's content is produced in dialogue with the audience through focus groups. The *Femina* team meets young people to learn from them what kind of information they need. Many of the articles are pre-tested on an audience to make sure that the words are youth-sensitive and the messages are clear to readers.

Apart from its ambition to reach out and influence young people in their choices around sexuality and lifestyle, Femina HIP also aims at having an impact on the political debate around these issues and, if possible, to act as a model for other media.

Could this quite outspoken, sexually affirmative approach be an inspiration to more mainstream media?

INTERVIEWS WITH TANZANIAN JOURNALISTS

In the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed 18 journalists within press, radio and television to learn how they reported about the epidemic. They all agreed on the fact that they had a duty to break the silence and raise awareness. Many of them claimed that they could be very open about HIV

and sexuality. The taboos were gone. An often-used example to illustrate this new openness was their reporting about the importance of using condoms. However, efficient sexual reproductive health information needs to do more than talk about condoms. And it was not until I asked my interviewees to comment on the *Femina* magazine that the answers got really interesting.

The *Femina* edition in circulation at the time when the interviews were conducted contained a couple of pages about safer sex. For instance, the text mentioned masturbation and oral sex as safer sex alternatives.

Confronting the respondents with these quite bold messages appeared to be a decisive moment in almost every interview. Only one man got upset and said that it was perverse to mention this kind of phenomena, and that he had not expected this “in a magazine funded by an apparently decent aid agency like Sida”.

Most of the other interviewees approved of the information and thought that it would be useful for young people. However, they claimed that it would be unsuitable to publish this kind of material in mainstream media, targeting broader groups of the population. Whether you are able to publish these quite daring examples of safer sex is not the issue. However, by using very concrete examples the respondents began to discuss this matter in more concrete terms. What is accepted and not?

A general opinion was that as a reporter you could write about almost anything: it was just a matter of which vocabulary you used. There was much talk about “proper” language. The interviews revealed a pattern: that Tanzanian journalists have become very skilled in “beating about the bush”, as some respondents put it. You write about sensitive things, but you do not spell out the bad words, just like in the “exchange of body fluids” example from the USA almost 20 years earlier. Another such example was the habit of referring to sexual genitals as “secret parts”.

IMPRECISE WORDS CREATE CONFUSION

One of my respondents expressed her frustration for not being able to call things by their right names: “It is very difficult to write a detailed article about sexuality so that young people can read and understand. If you call the vagina secret parts, what does it really mean? When young people are mature, the parents don’t tell them ‘if a boy enters his penis into a vagina you will get pregnant’. They say ‘if you meet with a boy you will get pregnant’. That creates confusion.”

Most other journalists I interviewed did not agree with her. They strongly supported the editorial practice to use a so-called “proper language” and did not hesitate to rephrase the words of the interviewees.

“Speaking the words very straight is not an African tradition, at least not in Tanzania. But we have come to understand that using expressions, like secrets parts, everybody is comfortable,” said one respondent.

“Calling a spade a spade is not what is important in HIV-reporting. Everybody knows what private parts stand for, so why offend people?” claimed another.

Although there was no reception analysis directly linked to my study, one could hypothesize that the less direct the communication is, the bigger the risk for misinterpretations, especially in a context like Tanzania, where the level of education is low and you need to be very precise in order for information to get through.

Even if we assume that everybody knows what the paraphrases stand for, there are other problems with using an imprecise language. There is an obvious risk that people stop listening. Mrs. Mihayo Bupamba, working with youth issues for the NGO African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF), was very critical of the language journalists use to educate people on sexually related issues. She said that people might possibly understand if you use synonyms, but would find the material discouraging to read. Especially young people, who have a completely different language: they get bored.

For instance, there is a specific word for sex in Kiswahili, “ngono”, but people use all kinds of other synonyms to avoid it. “It is like instead of saying orange you say a round fruit that is yellow. The word loses its meaning. There is too much polishing”, Bupamba claims.

The media market in Tanzania has undergone a process of liberalisation. Private enterprises, TV-channels and commercial radio stations keep mushrooming. Still, Tanzanian mass media cannot be considered to be free: the government could decide to close a news room. However, none of my respondents expressed any fear that their media house would be banned had they been very outspoken and progressive about sexuality. Instead, culture and tradition were referred to as the reasons why it would be unsuitable to push borders and stimulate the public debate around

sexuality. Even superiors claimed that it was beyond their decision to break new ground.

There was really no wish to break any barriers and be in the forefront. Still, very few criticized Femina and its frank style. Many respondents approved of the magazine's content and claimed that it worked because it was targeted to an audience that specifically needed the information.

FEMINA HIP SCALES UP

Five years have passed since I conducted my field study. Since then, there has been a tremendous development of Femina HIP. In 2001, the *Femina* magazine was the only media product in the project. It had a circulation of 30,000 copies, substantial in Tanzania but still with limited reach.

Today, the concept of the magazine remains the same, but it has been scaled up considerably: 100,000 copies are produced four times a year. It is distributed to all 1,400 secondary schools in the country and constitutes the only reading material on sexual health in the school setting. The magazine recently changed name and is now called *Fema*, to state that it is a gender-balanced magazine, equally relevant to young men and women.

Femina HIP also produces other media products. The Femina talk show (recently renamed *Fema* as well) was introduced a few years ago: it is a weekly TV programme produced in a studio, where people talk about healthy lifestyle and sexually related issues. Femina HIP also produces a series of booklets addressing issues how to live positively with HIV not with AIDS.

The most important achievement aimed at reaching the masses in Tanzania is SiMechezo. In contrast to the bilingual *Fema*, published in English and Kiswahili, SiMechezo is a purely Kiswahili magazine, which uses a more simple language to reach out of school youth: 100,000 copies are printed of each edition. Now a number of donors have decided to scale up their support, which means that circulation may reach 200,000 copies.

“Urban areas are well covered but we want to reach out to the country side. This is where you find people most in need of sexual reproductive health information,” said the project's coordinator Dr. Minou Fuglesang, in a recent interview.

APOLOGIZING ON NATIONAL TV

Dr. Fuglesang is of course well aware of the sensitivity implied in language use, and says that different media work under different conditions. National TV is more sensitive than tabloids, for example. Despite Femina's quite bold approach, bringing up sensitive issues in a youth friendly language, there have been few problems with the Tanzanian authorities.

"The reason for why we have had such a lot of support and little censorship is probably because we let people speak up about their experiences and views about lifestyles and sexuality. It is always their perspective that is the point of departure. We try not to preach and only convey facts."

However, Femina HIP has recently been reminded of the fact that it works in a context where language use is not only about using the words you prefer to choose, but also a politically sensitive issue.

"TICR, Tanzania's regulator board, has a clause that says that no foul language is to be used in the media broadcasts. For instance, we recently did a TV show where a man expressed that he did not want to use condoms because he wanted to do it "nyama kwa nyama" (meat to meat or skin to skin) and we had to ask for an apology and even president Kikwete commented it, so there is a limit to what you can talk about, write about", says Dr. Fuglesang.

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