

Reporting on Global Health: Experience of NGOs

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Journalists face a few extra challenges in covering international issues. When contacting a journalist, we have to consider the following. For example if we publish a report on medicines:

- What's new? What is the new info that is exciting about this report that has not been discussed before?
- Solid but simple story, reliable evidence. What is our statement/what are we saying in it and where is the evidence?
- Facts and figures. Does it have compelling but simple facts and figures? (price of x drug is \$xx and the number of people needing it are xxx).
- The human story. What is the real human story here? Ms Jessica has breast cancer and....
- The hook. The report is released on the eve of the UN conference on NCDs . If there is no particular event/hook, it becomes more difficult to get media interest.

In a UK context, it is not easy to get media interest in international stories because:

- Audience may not be aware of the issue – it does not relate to their life.
- Audience may not care anyway.
- Causes and solution are elsewhere; 'I cannot do anything about it'.
- Lack of reliable sources of information (though Google and Twitter are helpful).

However, let's look at good examples of covering what was uninteresting at the time, people did not particularly care, the reasons and solutions of the problems are elsewhere and at the time there was hardly any data: let's look at the story of HIV treatment and how it was covered.

The HIV treatment story

What made Western media take notice of a story that was:

- happening over there,
- an issue that is not particularly popular (HIV),
- Highly technical issues (TRIPS), and had
- no obvious solution?

The film *Fire in the Blood* records the story of HIV medicines and highlight the role of some journalists in exposing the terrible role of pharmaceutical companies in denying medicines to people living with HIV. The film particularly highlights the role of one journalist, Donald O'Neil from the *New York Times*. But the film does not emphasise the another excellent journalist who has been following global health issues and putting strong light on the role of pharma, politicians and others – Sarah Boseley from the *Guardian*. So we will have few quick snapshot to learn how the challenges of covering a foreign story were addressed. In our view, these are the factors that made such a foreign issue into a public-interest story:

1. What's new? Treatment turned a killer into a chronic disease.
2. Solid simple story reliable evidence: medicine in the North, patients in the South, companies putting profit before patients.
3. Facts and figures: PLWA, price
4. Human story: Graves X happy life.
5. Hook: HIV conferences, generic announcements, the race to decrease prices.

More importantly, journalists who understood the story, were willing to find out more information from all sides. A key factor to get media attention was the huge public outrage about the prices of HIV medicines and pharmaceutical company greed. NGOs provided journalists with the opportunity to make it an important story for a Western audiences.

However, the coverage differed widely. Some covered the issue as specific events but a few (like Sarah) dug deep into the details and seriously investigated the issue and continued to do so, giving continuous follow-up and exploring other dimensions to the story.

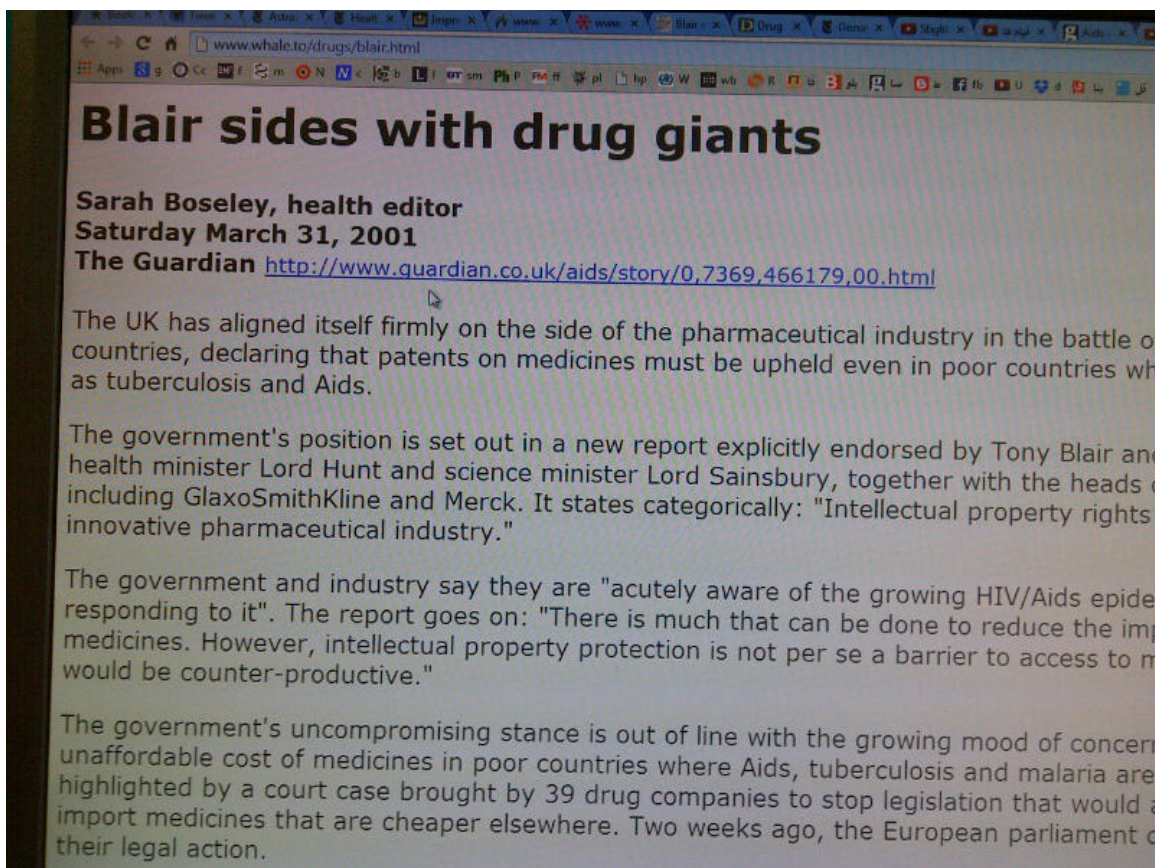


Figure 1

Let's start in 2001. This is a decade after the invention of effective anti-retrovirals which changed the face of the epidemic in the north but totally ignored the south. By 2001 NGOs had mounted a huge campaign against IP as the main reason for high prices and hence for lack of access. But despite huge public outcry, few media covered the story till 39 pharmaceutical companies took Mandela to court.

Figure 1 is very important as it shed the light on the fact that politicians were cahooting with big pharma and thus Western politicians were in effect hindering access to medicines.

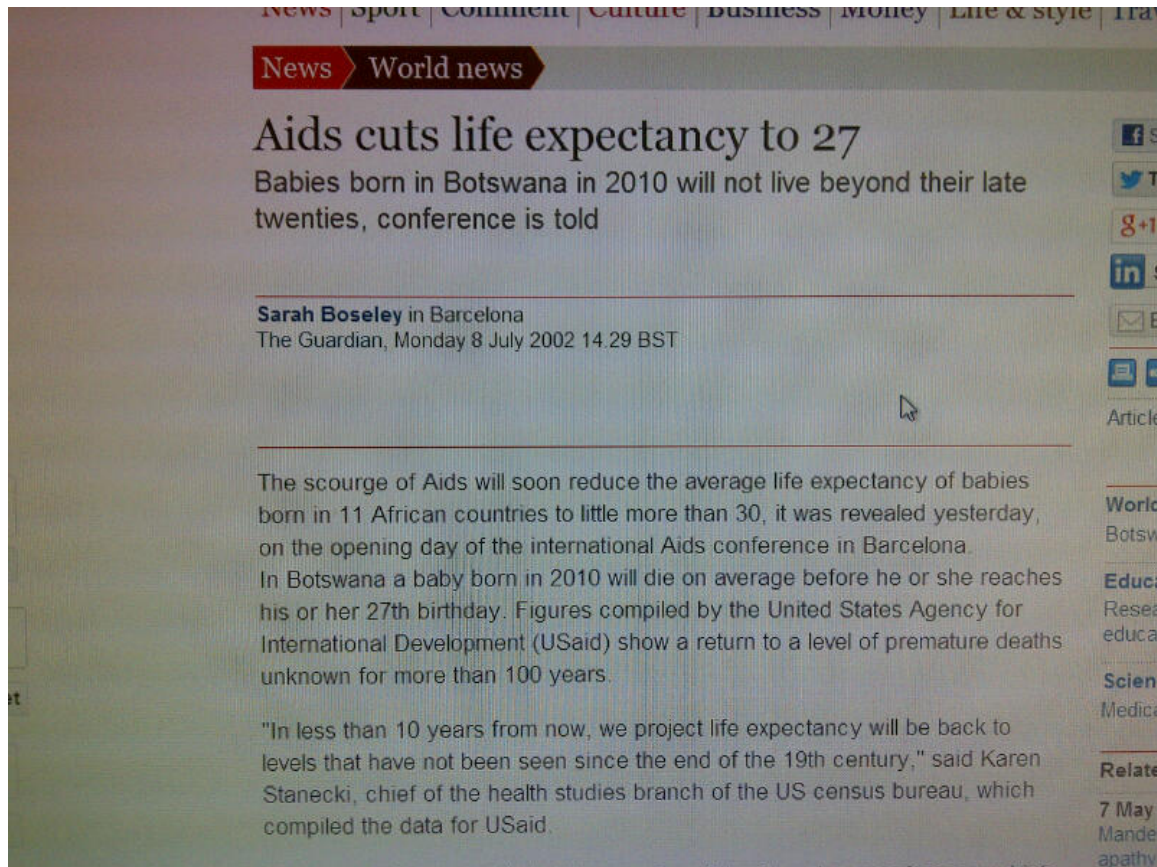


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows another example of coverage that highlights the seriousness of the problem.

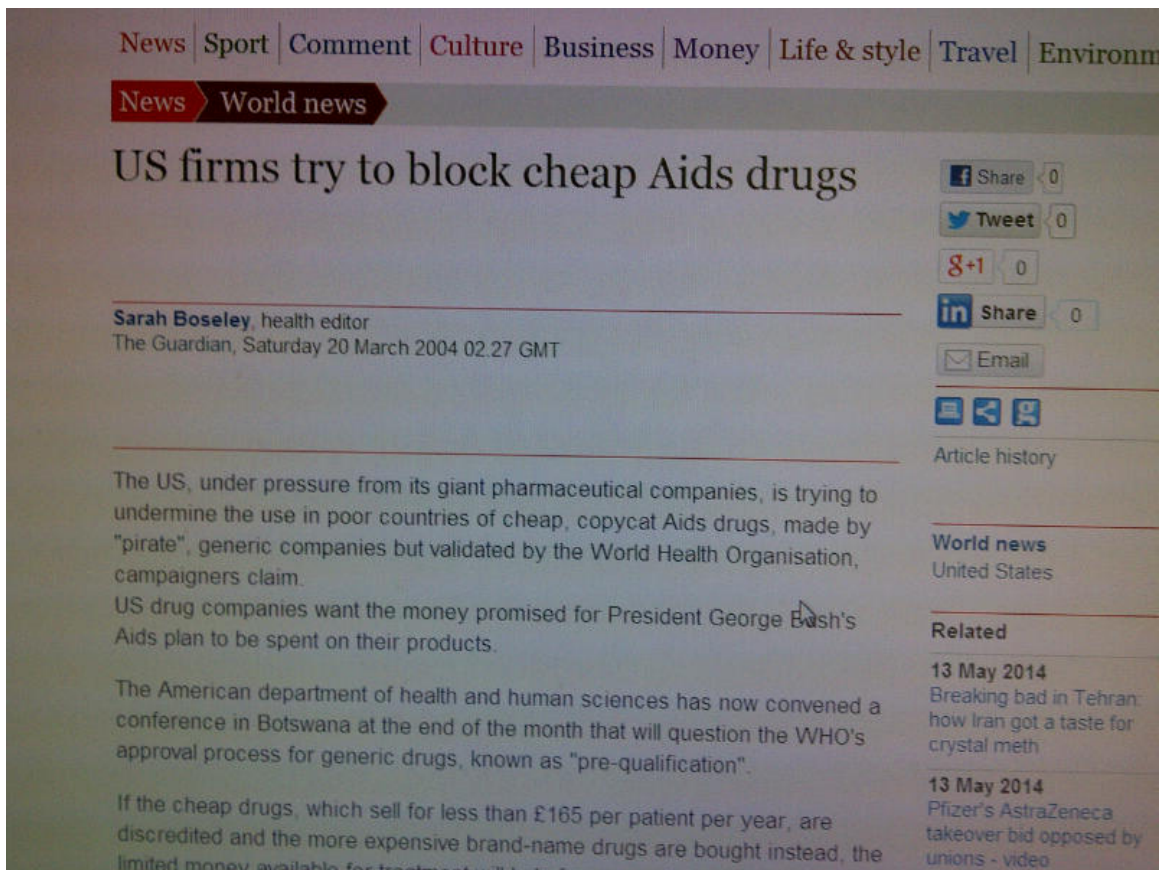


Figure 3

Figure 3 shows another example that highlights the issue focusing on the role of big pharma. It is also an example of good journalism that follows a story, covering more angles.



Figure 4

Figure 4 focuses on the root causes of high prices: serious investigative journalism.

Other stories

We have a number of stories similar to HIV but very little media coverage and a lack of general media interest. For example:

- Hardly any journalist who covered the story of Pfizer's attempt to take over Astra Zeneca raised a question about the impact of such merger on research development and price in developing countries.
- The wider problem of corporate power and monopoly on price (cancer, hepatitis C)
- Do we have to campaign for every disease and for every medicine? How do we get media interested?