



## HIV/AIDS and the Media

A grant from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs provided the National Committee the opportunity to conduct a two-way exchange project focusing on the media's role in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. The first phase brought seven Chinese journalists to the United States in March and April 2006 and the second sent a delegation of five American media and communication specialists to China to lead workshops in Beijing, Changsha and Guangzhou for two weeks in May.

Participants in the first phase were selected by the Committee from among those with experience reporting/producing stories on HIV/AIDS in some of China's more sophisticated media markets, as they tend to serve as role models for media elsewhere. We also favored individuals from organizations with a track record of independent, investigative reporting. By focusing on the top end of Chinese media professionals covering HIV/AIDS, we hoped our project would achieve a trickle-down effect.

The group included an excellent mix: we had representation from dailies, weeklies, and bi-monthlies; from both print and television; and from some of the most-watched/read publications in the country: *Caijing* magazine, *Southern Weekend*, and CCTV's "News Probe" (a Chinese equivalent of "60 Minutes") were a few of the publications represented. Some of these publications/shows enjoy national audiences, others provincial; some operate with significant independence, others under stricter state control.

We arranged a variety of meetings in New York and San Francisco (the two epicenters of the American HIV/AIDS epidemic and home to many experienced journalists covering the disease), as well as in Baltimore (home of U.S. project partner Johns Hopkins University) and nearby Washington, D.C. The Chinese met with journalists and other media professionals whose cover-age of HIV/AIDS has had an impact on policy debates, as well as on public awareness and attitudes. The group also visited HIV/AIDS service providers, public health officials, medical researchers, and others whose organizations are on the forefront of the fight against HIV/AIDS to learn about the ways that AIDS-related stigma and discrimination have been addressed in the United States and elsewhere. Participants also received a two-day training session organized by our partner organization, the Johns Hopkins-based Center for Communication Programs (CCP) at the Bloomberg Center for Public Health, on ways of designing and implementing strategic communication programs that influence discourse and behavior. The Center's main programs are concerned with health communications projects such as educational entertainment pro-grams (e.g., soap operas with strong HIV/AIDS and reproductive health messages inserted throughout) and Public Service Announcements.

Other highlights of the 2-day training session include the following:

- Laurie Garrett, a Pulitzer-prizewinning AIDS reporter for *New York Newsday* now at the Council on Foreign Relations (and sister of China specialist Banning Garrett), talked to the delegation about the "AIDS Superhighway" developing along newly opened drug trade routes between China and Burma.
- Two men living with HIV met the group at D.C.'s Whitman Walker Clinic for a very thoughtful discussion of how the disease has affected their lives and their relationships with others. Of particular interest to the delegation was their experience with antiretroviral (ARV) drug therapies and the descriptions of their side effects.
- The director of the Magnet Clinic, a storefront drop-in center in San Francisco, explained how the rapid HIV test is administered. One of the Chinese journalists in the group wanted very much to take the test himself as a role-playing exercise to see exactly how the technology functioned. The request was refused, but it led to an interesting discussion on false positives, privacy, and international law.



- Two lawyers who run Lambda Legal's HIV/AIDS division led a session on how the organization uses the court system to fight stigma and discrimination and the criminalization of HIV infectors.
- The founder and three members of Positive Voices, Positive Choices, a Baltimore nonprofit that sends HIV-positive men into Baltimore City public schools to talk frankly about HIV/AIDS, discussed their advocacy and educational work.

The second phase of the program, the workshops in China, was also extremely successful. Our delegation was made up of five very experienced experts: two representatives from our CCP partner and three journalists. Ms. Alice Merritt, deputy director of the CCP, has over 20 years of field experience in behavior change communication for HIV prevention and other public health issues across 20 countries, and Dr. Benjamin Lozare, associate director and chief of training at the CCP, was previously the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of the Philippines and the first director-general of the Philippine Information Agency. Given their years of working with developing countries, both are sensitive to local cultures and conditions and their substantive knowledge in the field and emphasis on leadership, prevention and strategic communication complemented the journalists' presentations on the role of media in efforts against HIV/AIDS and the techniques of its coverage.

The three journalists each have extensive experience covering the HIV/AIDS epidemics: Mr. Sabin Russell, a 30-year veteran who writes about medical science and health policy for the *San Francisco Chronicle*; Ms. Huntly Collins, who spent 18 years reporting for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* before becoming a journalism professor, and who has trained journalists from sub-Saharan Africa as well as minority communities in the United States how to cover the AIDS epidemics; and Mr. Kai Wright, a freelance journalist in New York who contributes regularly to leading publications as well as community press and has authored a number of books on the state of AIDS and other topics of concern to the African American community.

The delegation arrived in Beijing during the weekend of May 20-21, fortuitously the same week-end that Beijing was hosting the 2006 International AIDS Candlelight Memorial. The Memorial's objectives – "to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, to spread the important message of prevention and ultimately to decrease the stigma and discrimination associated with the infection" – made it a particularly appropriate event to kick off our program. The event was organized by Positive Art Workshop, a non-governmental HIV support group that uses art and other creative efforts to inspire and help persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). The delegation members took the opportunity to talk to many officials of AIDS organizations who attended, including people from UNAIDS, the CDC's Global AIDS Program, the Clinton Foundation and the U.S. Embassy.

The workshop in Beijing was held at Tsinghua University in collaboration with our Chinese partner, Tsinghua's School of Journalism and Communication. Supported by a generous grant from Mr. David A. Jones, Jr., of the C.E. & S. Foundation, we were able to expand significantly the scope of the workshop by extending it to two and half days and by inviting more than half of the participants from outside Beijing. The 28 participants in the Tsinghua workshop came from across the country, representing the provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang in the north-west; Guangxi, Hunan and Sichuan in the south and southwest; Jilin in the northeast, as well as Zhejiang in eastern China. They work in print, radio, TV and on-line journalism. The potential impact of the workshop was much enhanced with the inclusion of these journalists from outside Beijing.

As a result of the workshop, the American group came to understand more about the challenging environment in which their Chinese counterparts who report on HIV/AIDS operate. In China today, government interference with news reportage remains strong; some participants cited specific examples of their stories not being allowed into print, often not as a matter of policy, but because they ran afoul of local protected interests. On the other hand, there



has been a greater openness and tolerance in public health reporting following the SARS crisis, which has been frequently cited as a defining moment in China's efforts to contain the AIDS epidemics.

Greater obstacles come from the general public, whose fear of and intense prejudice against PLWHA make AIDS reporting imperative, but whose general apathy makes AIDS reporting a hard sell to editors. It also comes from the nature of Chinese journalism, where most reporters are required to produce a certain number of articles per week, with their pay linked accordingly. Most reporters therefore can hardly afford the luxury of spending weeks preparing an investigative or human-interest piece that puts a human face on those living with HIV, even though they recognize it as an effective way to dispel prejudice and discrimination.

Still, within the great constraints every reporter faces, there is room for each to improve by learning effective reporting strategies. This became the focus of the presentations and discussions, an area the American experts could speak to with great authority. Both Mr. Russell and Ms. Collins started covering AIDS in the earliest stage of the epidemic in the United States, when it was not a welcome topic in most papers. Ms. Collins' husband died of AIDS in the early 1980s, a revelation that brought brief, yet palpable silence to the audience and added extra meaning to everything she said. Her revelation, together with personal stories related by other experts, opened up the participants considerably during the Q&A and breakout sessions. Among the many issues discussed were how to turn medical jargon into language that the general public would understand and relate to, how to avoid unintentional stigmatization and remain truthful when telling human interest stories, how to foster a sense of professional responsibility and ethics among reporters, and how to tread the thin line of permissibility in reporting sensitive topics. In addition to the five American experts on the National Committee delegation, the workshop at Tsinghua also benefited from the expertise of several Beijing-based specialists in HIV/AIDS and/or journalism.

The National Committee's five experts repeated their presentations in the days that followed in workshops in Changsha and Guangzhou, receiving a great deal of local support and enthusiasm. After their return to the United States, the delegation members continued making efforts to maintain or deepen the ties formed during their China trip. Mr. Russell wrote a long piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on China's recent efforts to fight HIV/AIDS, drawing from his interviews in Changsha and elsewhere. Ms. Collins met Chinese reporters again in August during the inter-national AIDS conference in Toronto. Some seeds of future collaboration were also planted during the trip between Xiangya School of Medicine in Changsha and Johns Hopkins University. The two sides are exploring possible ways to work together on HIV/AIDS and other public health issues in China, with the National Committee lending its support.

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