

**The following speech was delivered by Laurie Garrett at a plenary symposium of the XIII International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, July 13, 2000.**

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In the late 17th century, Daniel Defoe penned a brilliant account of the 1665 Black Death of London: THE PLAGUE YEARS. There was just one catch ---- Defoe wasn't actually there. He wasn't even born when it happened. His entire account was based on renditions from a surviving uncle.

We actually have scarce few accounts of any of the great plagues of the past. We know they occurred, we know they took a terrible toll. We know that between 1346 to 1350 Yersinia pestis claimed a quarter, to a third of the population of Europe and Central Asia. But we know no details.

There were no journalists.

Botticelli kept a diary of his views of Siena's 14th century plague. But that's not journalism. Barbara Tuchman's DISTANT MIRROR, 10 centuries after that plague, gives a better rendition of those events. But even she is doing a lot of guess-work. Still, from her we learned that societies were so overwhelmed by the impact that entire cultures were obliterated or turned upside down, the Catholic Church's power began to be eroded, the aristocracy came under threat for the first time, and ultimately the Renaissance was ushered in.

That was then, this is now.

Today, we can bring you death, live on TV from sub-Saharan Africa. In the comfort of your home you can watch the plague. In Los Angeles, Paris or Tokyo sipping Chablis while saying, "tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk," you can watch the sad images of AIDS orphans and dying families in Zimbabwe or Congo, where the real suffering is going on. Suffering that, from the comfort of your Western home, you can relate to just about as emotionally deeply as you can to Barbara Tuchman's book about the plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

Larry Gostin, of Georgetown University, who has been in this game from the very beginning, has a term for this. He calls it Death Voyeurism. We of the Northern Hemisphere watch while the South suffers, and the media provides the bridge, displaying it comfortably in the living rooms of the North.

In 1987 Jonathan Mann organized the first meeting that tried to examine the possibility of having a prevention effort for AIDS. It took place in Ixtapa, Mexico. I addressed that meeting on the subject journalists are typically asked to talk about: the media and AIDS. And I thought at the time that it was appropriate to say that it was our job to tell stories, and show the face of the epidemic. Our job was to take the reader, or the listener or the viewer, into the epidemic, and display the despair.

I was already wrong.

As I spoke I did something I naively thought was absolutely terrific. I took my hat off to a colleague from Kenya, and I mentioned him by name, describing him as a bold and courageous, independent journalist working outside the government broadcasting system to bring information about AIDS to the Kenyan people at a time when virtually nobody said the word AIDS. As soon as I stepped off the podium a Kenyan scientist approached me and said, "You just signed his death warrant." And, indeed, the journalist I had praised was arrested later that afternoon in Nairobi.

For the next two days Jonathan Mann and I did everything we could to gain his release and fortunately we were successful.

And I grew up.

I think it's high time that the entire international media and press corps grow up. It's high time all of us, North and South, stop simply saying, "It's sad. It's pathetic. The numbers are huge. It's getting worse. Oh my gosh!" We must take our jobs far more seriously than that. We must in real time do what Defoe did

retrospectively about the Black Death. We have to name names, we have to demand accountability. We have to demand the truth.

Those of you who are in science and public health here in this room, and who just applauded what I said, often speak of, "using the media" to get out your message. You are fools. Pardon me, but nobody "uses" journalists. Except, of course, corrupt officials, dictators and other ne'erdowells. If the media is behaving properly it is skeptical of each and every one of you in this room, every single day, and demands the truth of you. How are you spending those donated funds? What programs are you implementing with them? Are you letting your egos and your careers get in the way of doing what is best for this epidemic? Are you Northern Hemisphere scientists working in a sensitive and productive manner with Southern Hemisphere scientists?

Government officials --- if the media is doing its job it is a thorn in your side every damned day. We are asking --- indeed, demanding --- to know how taxpayer dollars are being spent, if good science is coming out of your laboratories, and if the national leadership is doing everything it could and should do.

And for you in the private sector --- this meeting is, by the way, sponsored by a drug company ---whether you are a pharmaceutical manufacturer, the medical industry, insurance companies, banks --- whatever --- again, journalism is going to scrutinize you whether you like it or not. That is, if it's good journalism.

Oh, let's not forget the NGOs. Hey, just because you're not governmental doesn't mean that you know what you're doing, or that you're saints. You, too, get money from some sort of public source and your failures to spend it properly should be called on the carpet by vigilant, credible journalists. You should all appreciate this scrutiny, as an asset in the overall future of our fight against this epidemic. But first, there's some limitations, on the media side. In the wealthy world most media organizations--- newspapers, radio, on-line --- have in the last few years been gobbled up by large corporations. It's very rare now in the wealthy world to run across family-owned, large media operations. And what that means is that now our media bosses expect us to meet a bottom line, a certain profit margin, a given stock market flow. And in order to do so we have to be catchy, be there 24 hours a day, be there all of the time. Total access! We are there in your living room. And what suffers in this atmosphere of immediacy is analysis. What suffers in this search for speed is depth.

The wealthy world media is becoming increasingly simplistic, superficial and celebrity focused. In the developing world much of the media is government owned or tightly controlled. So-called independent media in the developing world are often actually owned by local business magnates, even some with rather shady criminal relationships. The infrastructure of media in the Southern Hemisphere is generally pretty poor and it takes a lot of guts to be a reporter in most of the developing world.

I was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for my coverage of the Ebola epidemic in Kikwit, Zaire. And for years people came up to me and said, "Oh my goodness, you were so courageous! You were there for three weeks in an epidemic!" That's not guts, folks, because at any moment I had a U.S. passport, a pile of cash, a ton of credit cards and a home base that was practically on another planet, to which I could escape. Not so, for my colleagues who are citizens of the developing countries. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists --- an independent watchdog agency --- last year was a record-breaking year on the journalism front because 34 journalists were killed in the line of duty. Ten of them were in Sierra Leone and three in Nigeria. Eighty-seven journalists were in prisons specifically because of a particular article they wrote or story they broadcast.

And in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kabila jailed 60 reporters in a single week.

War-related intimidation of the press is expanding in Africa at this moment primarily because the Congo conflict is widening. Currently seven countries or guerrilla groups have combat forces on the ground in DROC, and an additional six are providing safe haven in their territory to guerrillas and combatants. At least another six are actively supplying arms. There's tremendous threat that this conflict is in fact become World War III, centered here in Africa. Fought, by the way, primarily over diamonds, according to the World Bank's recent report.

The implications of this for AIDS coverage are that in such an atmosphere it takes a great deal of courage to ask questions and demand answers. Three weeks ago \[in June, 2000\] I was in Zimbabwe enquiring about AIDS in a rural area just before the national elections. As I was doing so a group of ZANU thugs threatened to kill me --- simply because I was asking about HIV. Now, when such a threat comes down on me I have this white skin, an American passport and the money to buy a plane ticket home. Ultimately, I had nothing to fear as long as I didn't do anything stupid. It's quite another thing for my colleagues who are Zimbabwean. I think that it's fair to say that the notion of disparity between the North and South --- including between the enterprises of journalism in the two hemispheres --- is a major theme of this meeting. This is a turning point meeting --- there is absolutely no doubt about it. The North/South issue is on the table, pharmaceutical drug access is on the table, corporate profits are on the table, and science has been pressed into a social reality context for the first time since we acknowledged the existence of HIV.

There is a face on the epidemic. There's massive attention being paid to African the media at this time, and every American has had an opportunity this week to be an AIDS voyeur.

Well, that's great. But it's not enough.

Now the press has a duty to start asking some tough questions. How does the AIDS community plan to capitalize on this newfound attention and concern on the part of the United Nations Security Council and the wealthy countries? What forces of corruption are, or will be, emerging when money is really around: not thousands of dollars, but the requested billions of dollars? Are there African equivalents of that scoundrel Dr. Yamil Khouri who was convicted along with his gang of thieves for stealing thousands of dollars from the San Juan AIDS Institute in Puerto Rico? Are there plague thieves in India? Plague thieves in Russia? Plague thieves in your country? In my country? The epidemic in Africa has ruralized. What I have seen in rural areas is absolutely chilling. The media has little impact in any of the rural developing world --- what kind of challenge does that bring to the media organizations on this continent?

But most important, I think, is what is the strategy? How can we slow this plague in the absence of a vaccine or cure? I know of no more important question for journalists to be asking at this moment. After all, there is no other force on Earth --- no wars, no famines, no genocide --- that is killing as many millions of people today as is this damnable microbe. At this meeting we have learned from Family Health International's Peter Lamptey that prevention efforts really do work. And we learned from Oxford University's Roy Anderson that in the absence of very aggressive prevention now, obliteration of entire populations is virtually guaranteed. From Kevin deCock, of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we heard of the lack of essential public health systems in the hardest hit places, and the necessity to immediately put in place programs to distribute sterile syringes, blood safety systems, full child immunization and tuberculosis control.

Mead Over of the World Bank tells us, however, that the entire foreign investment for AIDS/HIV in Africa hit less than \$300 million last year. Congress allocated just \$15 million for FY2000, none of which has actually found its way to the designated United Nations agency, though the fiscal year is nearly over. Katherine Floyd, also of Oxford University, told us yesterday that here in South Africa the cost of hospitalization for HIV and its companion, TB, has soared: since 1990 it has increased 720 percent in KwaZuluNatal, alone. A group of Tanzanian doctors recently published heartbreaking information in *Daedalus* describing the agony of being physicians that are utterly helpless before a plague --- a sense of frustration, of cynicism, of emotional numbing and a higher mistake rate in the practice of all forms of medicine. On the village level Gabriel Rugalema has chronicled the complete eradication of the tribal clan structure, with the collapse of inheritance, social fabric, morals and agricultural production. And he describes rising lawlessness as AIDS orphans reach their teenage and young adult years.

And the effect of communications is only now beginning to be understood. I want to draw your attention to this booklet, put together by Bunni Makinwa of the United Nations AIDS Programme and researchers from Penn State, called "Communications Framework for HIV/AIDS". One of the key points this book makes is that mass communication --- the sort of work I do --- doesn't seem to have a huge impact on changing

behavior. There is a greater need for targeted community-based communication, that draw on spiritualism and integrate it into every single effort.

Back to the question: What is the strategy? If there had been a journalist covering the 14th Century plague, one of the questions I hope would have been asked is, "How exactly does burning another Jew at the stake stop this plague?" Defoe told us of the corruption of London during the plague. Of undertakers who gouged money out of families. And of the aristocracy that fled the countryside and abandoned the poor of London. He further tells us that the only reason the plague stopped is that London caught fire. Even though he was a generation after the fact, Defoe still pointed his finger at the rich, the heartless and the cruel.

The press and the media have, I would say, a duty to reveal those sorts of trends now, in real time, in our modern plague. Leaders must be held accountable. Corruption must be exposed. Ineptitude and careerism must be fingered. And where it exists, success must be underscored and then followed by the question, "If it works here, why not over there?" We aren't watching a football game, Ladies and Gentlemen. This isn't the Persian Gulf War live on CNN. We are watching what Roy Anderson told us is the single most devastating event in the history of this continent, possibly outstripping the impacts of both colonialism and slavery.

And in press parlance, that's a big story.