

In College Incident, Kenyan Station Reverses Dangerous Misperceptions

Kenyan radio station's solid, effective journalism combats dangerous misunderstandings about HIV infection.

Kenyan newspapers recently carried reports about a law student at Moi University in Eldoret who posted a list on a college notice board with 118 names of people she claimed to have infected with HIV. The anonymous student alleged that she had used condoms during six encounters only and that her sex partners included several lecturers.

The incident wreaked havoc with students and lecturers and triggered a media frenzy of sensational reports that only served to worsen the situation. The reports did not carry any confirmation on whether the incident was a hoax or not and mostly fostered the perception that AIDS was spreading on the campus because of promiscuity and revengefulness.

SOLID JOURNALISM

But the Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation's (KBC) weekly HIV/AIDS program, "A Stitch in Time", handled the incident in a different way. "We included a counselor, a person living with AIDS (PLWA) and a psychologist in our program to make sure that we could address the reason why someone would do something like this and also look at solutions," said producer Ann Mikia and freelance presenter Sammy Muraya. "We also wanted to ensure that we don't leave people with the perception that all PLWAs are vindictive and revengeful."

NATIONWIDE RESPONSE

During the hour-long program, which reaches over 3 million Kenyans nationwide, more than 30 people phoned in or sent text messages, including four Moi University students. The counselor emphasized that whether the incident was a hoax or not, it remains important to discuss the issue, as "these things happen."

One student felt that the female student did the right thing to attempt to infect so many people, because "it will help



KBC producer Ann Mikia editing her story in the Internews studio in Nairobi.

people fight promiscuity." Sarah Olga, the PLWA on the program, as well as the on-air psychologist asked the student, "What would you have said if it was your brother or sister who got infected?" Olga emphasized that HIV was not for "someone out there, but the people who are infected are people we know – our siblings and friends." Thinking that HIV is only spread by a "promiscuous student and not through normal sexual encounters, would be insane."

ON-AIR COUNSELING

Olga recommended that all campus students receive counseling to cope with this incident, but more importantly, that they use this opportunity to visit a VCT center where proper pre-test counseling is provided.

"It's been one of our most successful programs ever," says Muraya. "We basically provided on-air counseling for traumatized students and judging by the amount of call-ins we received, this was a very popular program."

Mikia and Muraya have been trained by the Local Voices program in Nairobi, which trains and supports radio professionals to improve their reporting on HIV/AIDS. They used the Local Voices Media Resource Center and the program's phone, research and studio to produce the program. Local Voices also provided them with a cell phone number to which listeners could send text messages. Internews' Local Voices program is funded by USAID through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

