

# Information Saves Lives in Liberia

Credible information quelled fears and dispelled myths about Ebola.



*Liberian girls stand in front of Ebola-prevention messages that are part of the Information Saves Lives projects.*

The deadly Ebola outbreak in 2014 left tens of thousands of West Africans dead or battling with disease. To halt the epidemic, people in Liberia needed to know how to identify early symptoms, how to prevent or mitigate transmission and where to receive medical help. However, as in most humanitarian crises, a lack of accurate and up to date information about the disease exacerbated fear, panic and mistrust while hindering the humanitarian response.

Internews established the “Information Saves Lives” program in Liberia to investigate and respond to misinformation about Ebola; train and empower journalists to report accurately on health issues; and to stimulate the exchange of information in response to the urgent Ebola health crisis. Ebola was everywhere, and in time Ebola warnings and messages appeared to be everywhere too.

The program has been widely cited by the humanitarian community as an example of innovation and responsiveness. Rumors collected were collated and interpreted to provide details about the areas of misunderstanding. These rumors were then debunked by interviewing medical and cultural experts and then disseminated back to their sources in the form of humanitarian and media newsletters.

## Program Highlights

Though only six months long, “Information Saves Lives” achieved the following results:

- Within the first two weeks of launching the DeySay Rumor tracker, Internews had already collected 127 rumors from a network of around 2000 informants.
- Every week Internews shared the media newsletter with 317 media actors across the country, including radio producers, online media editors, newspaper editors, station managers, and freelance journalists.
- 18 editions of the media newsletter were published and distributed to local media outlets and 132 local media associations operating in Liberia
- 17 editions of the humanitarian newsletter were published and distributed to more than 500 humanitarian staff belong to over 200 organizations operating in Liberia

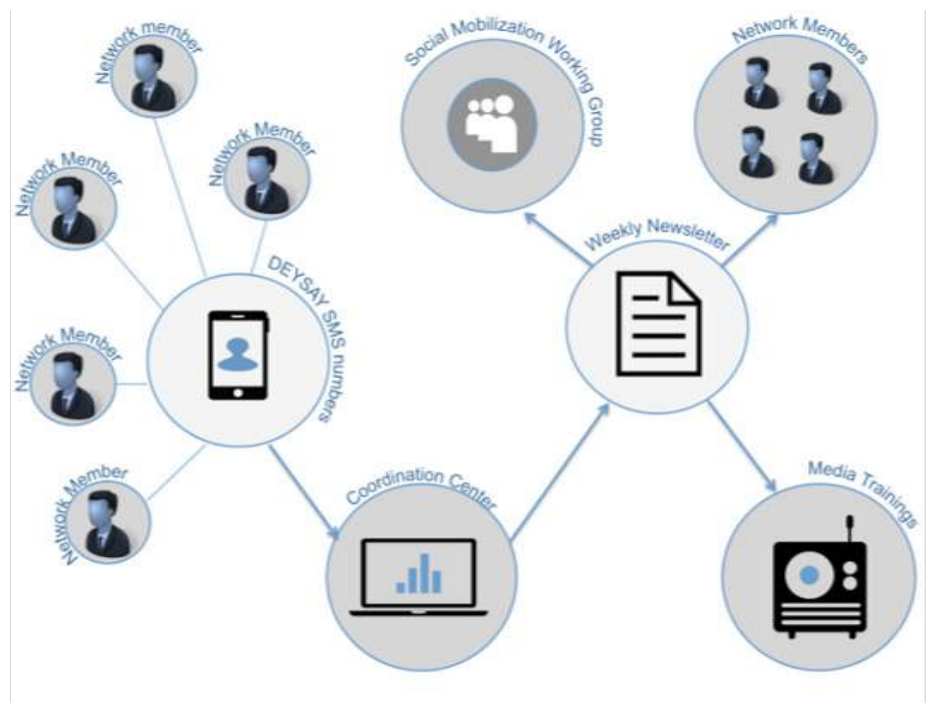
In partnership with the Liberian National Red Cross Society, UNICEF and Project Concern International, Internews developed a simple but critical new tool, DeySay SMS (“Dey Say” refers to how people speak about rumors in Liberian English), to detect and manage rumors in as close to real-time as possible.

UNICEF provided an SMS short code for free to hundreds of health workers, NGOs, and volunteers through Liberia, through which anyone could text rumors they heard to the central coordination hub in Monrovia. A RapidPro dashboard picked up the rumors and allowed the hub to collect and analyze them for trends.

DeySay also produced a weekly newsletter for Liberian media that highlighted these trends and rumors and offered insights into the information gaps and challenges around Ebola and health reporting that may have caused these rumors. Later in the project, Internews even began using taxis traveling to different counties to distribute the media newsletter.

In order to share this information with the humanitarian agencies and with the Social Mobilization Working Group under the Incident Management System structure, DeySay also produced a weekly humanitarian newsletter that highlighted any feedback on humanitarian activities and identified the most important issues emerging from the rumor collection about humanitarian aid and response.

The information collected served as a basis for designing a journalism training program. A tailored training program, interspersed with one-on-one mentoring followed all technical and institutional aspects of the Ebola epidemic (the science, the government and humanitarian response, the economic



The infographic above shows how the “DeySay” rumor tracker worked.

implications, and the clear indication that a more robust health system was needed). The training included mentorship, editorial support and intensive workshops that also covered basic journalism skills to ensure the reporting on Ebola was most impactful.

### Information Saves Lives II

Internews introduced a follow-up to this rapid response program, Information Saves Lives II, also funded under USAID’s Health Communication Capacity Collaborative (HC3) mechanism. Ebola had opened the window to systemic health issues in Liberia and to the fact that all actors in the information ecosystem needed to be better equipped to communicate about health issues. In the second Information Saves Lives program, the focus expanded to wider health issues, such as improving the general health journalism landscape, tracking health rumors and building

deeper and better communication with communities. To nurture a sustainable media landscape and to encourage public discourse around health-related issues, Internews continued its ongoing support for community radio stations and print media, ensuring more reliable and expansive health reporting.

The program also empowered a new crop of health journalists to write about citizen’s health concerns and expose poor health governance. Four of the trainees have received nominations for other training programs in the region for international vocational exchange – showing that health journalism can open doors to opportunities for career advancements. This program also established, LiberiaHealthBeat.org, a website and repository of stories produced during the journalism fellowship and beyond.