

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass
Communications

Journalism and Mass Communications, College of

2014

A Lesson in Crisis Communications and Transparency from Sub-Saharan Africa

Dane M. Kiambi

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dane.kiambi@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub>



Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Kiambi, Dane M., "A Lesson in Crisis Communications and Transparency from Sub-Saharan Africa" (2014). *Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications*. 108.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub/108>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journalism and Mass Communications, College of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A Lesson in Crisis Communications and Transparency from Sub-Saharan Africa

By Dane Kiambi

The increased penetration of smart phones in Sub-Saharan Africa and the enthusiasm toward social media highlights the need for crisis managers working in the region to sharpen their crisis management skills to effectively protect and restore the reputations of their organizations.

Research has consistently shown that Africa is the only region of the world where growth in mobile connections is expected in the next five years. Coupled with the ongoing increase in high-speed internet connections, there is little doubt that creating and sharing information online among locals will reach new proportions.

Research by **Portland Communications** showed that South Africa was the continent's most active country on **Twitter**, with over 5 million tweets sent in the fourth quarter of 2011. Kenya was second, with close to 2.5 million tweets sent. Sixty-eight percent of those polled said they used Twitter to monitor news.

The enthusiasm toward social media in Sub-Saharan Africa and the high pace of information sharing during a crisis became evident in Kenya in September 2013, following allegations that some Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) soldiers had looted the Westgate Shopping Mall in the capital city Nairobi during a rescue mission at the mall following a terrorist attack.

Public interest in the allegations of looting against the Kenyan soldiers was height-

ened by the fact that the Kenyan military was one of the most reputable institutions in the country before the accusations emerged. Over the years, the Kenyan military has earned international accolades for its exemplary professionalism during the African Union and United Nations peacekeeping missions in troubled parts of the world.

Attacks on the media only served to energize and unite the traditional media, bloggers and micro-bloggers against the military.

The Kenyan military's entry into troubled Somalia in 2012 in pursuit of al-Qaeda-linked al Shabaab militants and the subsequent defeat of the terrorist group in major towns in Somalia earned the Kenyan soldiers further local and international admiration. A survey conducted in July 2012 by **Gallup** found that the military was the most trusted institution in Kenya, with a trust index of 87 percent.

The military's reputation among the Kenyan public, however, took a serious beating after the accusations of soldiers looting the shopping mall surfaced. A December 2013 survey by **Ipsos Synovate** showed that public trust in the military had dropped to 32 percent.

Keen media observers were quick to heap the blame on the rank and file of the KDF for mishandling the crisis over allegations of

some soldiers looting the shopping mall.

The *Daily Nation*, the largest newspaper in Kenya by circulation, was one of the first to show and report on surveillance footage showing scores of soldiers rummaging through one of the supermarkets in the shopping mall and leaving with white polythene bags whose contents could not be established.

In response to the allegations, the Kenyan military vehemently denied that its soldiers had been involved in any theft of property at the shopping mall. Through a press statement by the cabinet secretary for Defense, the military bolstered its long-standing professional credentials, and reiterated that the moral fiber of its soldiers was exemplary.

The denial almost immediately triggered a deluge of accusations of a cover-up and set Twitter, Facebook, and other social media channels on fire. Within a period of minutes, thousands of Kenyans on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter shared the CCTV footage showing Kenyan soldiers leaving a supermarket in the ill-fated mall with white polythene bags.

A second denial—by the Chief of Defense Forces General Julius Karang—that the soldiers had not been involved in the looting of the shops seemed to anger social media users further. In his follow-up denial, Karangi explained that the white polythene bags that soldiers carried from the supermarket contained drinking water and that they had obtained the authority of their commanders to take the water with them.

As the military chief was issuing this denial, two Kenya military spokespeople were contradicting each other in the media. While spokesperson Emmanuel Chirchir maintained that no money had been lost in the ill-fated Westgate mall, another spokesperson, Cyrus Oguna, was telling the media that a bank and a casino had lost approximately \$34,000.

Two days after the first denial, the military's top brass, led by Karangi, met with

members of two parliamentary committees—the National Security and the Defense and Foreign Relations committees—to further strategize on how the committees would apparently come to the aid of the military in a bid to ward off the damaging allegations.

At a press conference denying that soldiers had looted the mall, the chairpeople of the two parliamentary committees criticized the media, particularly social media, for maligning the name of Kenyan soldiers.

The apparent shielding of the military by the two parliamentary committees made matters worse for the military. Top stand-up comedians even mimicked the soldiers and the parliamentarians in their combined effort to conceal the truth from Kenyans. Kenya's Parliament is the worst rated institution in terms of trust and performance due to endless efforts by legislators to award themselves huge wages and allowances through amendments to existing law.

Writing in the *Daily Nation*, columnist Macharia Gaitho lambasted the military's top brass for denying the obvious. "The Westgate terrorist attack united us as a nation, but that does not mean we must sweep inconvenient truths under the carpet," he wrote, asking for the soldiers to accept responsibility for the looting of the mall and the punishment of the culprits.

After weeks of futile public denials, the commanders emerged before the media cameras one afternoon and owned up to the mistake. Karangi informed the country that investigators had identified two soldiers who had looted the mall and that they had been fired. A few more soldiers were being investigated in connection with the mall looting, and the outcome would be communicated to the public in due course, Karangi noted.

Crisis communication managers can learn a few lessons from how the Kenyan military handled the crisis:

- **Do not deny when there is overwhelming evidence against your organization.** In this day and age, it doesn't take much effort for organizational stakeholders and citizen journalists to authenticate allegations against an organization. It boggles the mind why the Kenyan military embraced the denial strategy even as CCTV cameras obtained from the damaged mall clearly showed some of its soldiers leaving the mall with white bags. The fast paced sharing of the videos among Kenyans on social media ensured that they would greet the military's denial with contempt and anger.
- **Do not seek allies whose reputation is questionable.** The Kenyan military embraced another suicidal crisis management strategy when it sought protection from members of the two parliamentary committees. The emergence of legislators defending the soldiers from the accusations seemed to only intensify the crisis. Kenyan legislators seem to have the worst reputation among the public as a result of successive attempts to amend the law and award themselves huge pay. In a crisis, it would be advisable to associate with allies who have credibility with your stakeholders.
- **If you are to blame, take responsibility and apologize, and do it quickly.** Immediately after the CCTV videos against the Kenyan soldiers emerged, many on social media demanded that the military take responsibility and issue an apology over the scandal. Because the military took longer to accept responsibility and apologize to the public than it should have, the crisis continued to grow, ultimately damaging the long-standing good reputation that the military had enjoyed among Kenyans.

- **Maintain a consistent message from the spokespeople.** Two military spokespeople issued contradictory messages regarding whether or not some money had been lost to the looters of the mall. Inconsistent messages from an organization in a crisis are perceived to be a sign of inability to make solid and truthful decisions. Following the conflicting messages, the Kenyan public lambasted the military for concocting lies. Why have two spokespersons anyway? One spokesperson would have been enough to handle the Kenyan military crisis.
- **Do not attack the media.** At a press conference to defend the soldiers from allegations of looting the mall, the two chairpersons of the parliamentary committees accused the media of falsely blaming the soldiers. The legislators also attacked Kenyans on social media for maligning the name of the soldiers. The attacks on the media only served to energize and unite the traditional media, bloggers and micro-bloggers against the military. For more than a week, newspaper headlines, radio and TV news, and posts on social media were devoted to the military crisis. In near unison, the media accused the top brass of the military of orchestrating a cover-up of the scandal and demanded the resignation of the Chief of Defense Forces, General Karangi.

Had the Kenyan military handled the crisis with more transparency and urgency, they could have succeeded in protecting the reputation of the institution from harm. **PRN**

Dane Kiambi, Ph.D., is assistant professor of public relations at the college of journalism and mass communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.