

# AVAC Capability Statement: Media Science Cafés



Research has shown that the quality, accuracy, and tenor of media coverage on health can significantly impact knowledge, behavior, perception and policy. Throughout the HIV/AIDS epidemic, journalists have been instrumental in educating and informing the public and influencing the response. Compelling, accurate and nuanced science/health media stories depend on strong connections between subject matter experts, journalists and people with lived experience. To forge such relationships, journalists need forums where scientists and civil society can explain their work in plain language and respond to questions. Also, affected communities need a seat at the table to provide perspectives that capture the full impact of the health issues being discussed.



Since 2012, AVAC has worked to strengthen the capacity of journalists to report on HIV prevention research and global health and science topics. Through its flagship **Media Science Café Program**, AVAC partners with health media associations in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe to connect journalists with subject matter experts – researchers, policymakers and advocates – and help build the relationships needed to foster accurate and informed reporting of HIV, COVID and emerging health and science issues.

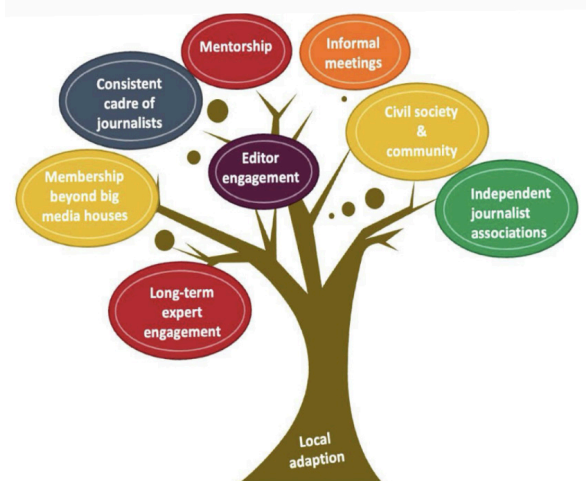
## By the numbers:

<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>&gt;250</b>	<b>1000+</b>	<b>~230 Mil</b>
countries	years	journalists engaged	of articles written	people served with reporting influenced by media

**The Model:** Café conveners, supported by AVAC, host monthly Media Science Cafés that bring together ~20–30 journalists with expert speakers on a timely health topic. The original café program began in Uganda, with meetings under a tree, and this informality continues to be the program’s ethos. Researchers and other experts are asked to explain and discuss – without slides – a relevant health or research topic. The model allows for back-and-forth discussion and helps build trust between journalists and experts.

Initially, the cafés focused on HIV/AIDS, including prevention, treatment and cure research, the funding landscape, and human rights issues. In 2020, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the program expanded to include COVID, vaccination, pandemic preparedness, climate change and health. Regardless of the topic, all cafés include civil society and community experts to ensure equitable and accurate representations of the people at the heart of global health issues.

## Branches of the Media Science Café Program



Each café program is convened by well-respected senior journalists (conveners) who work closely with AVAC to guide the overall program. In 2023, AVAC developed the Media Science Café Consortium, which is transferring leadership and capacity strengthening to African partners and is currently led by the Kenyan partner Media for Environment Science and Health (MESHA).

### **In their own words:**

*“Journalists have been using insights from science cafés to deliver comprehensive reporting on critical issues like public health, environmental concerns or scientific breakthroughs... We now possess a cohort of journalists who are adept at delivering accurate health and science stories and possess a wealth of knowledge and a network of reliable sources.”—Aghan Daniels (Kenya café convener)*

AVAC’s three strategic pillars work together to influence the life cycle of biomedical research from early-stage studies to large-scale rollout and eventual impact with a strong track record of success. This model is built on community-owned, rights-based, research-literate strategies implemented by a global network of informed and engaged health advocates. AVAC is committed to advocacy for people-centered research and works to remove biomedical, behavioral and structural barriers to the development, delivery and uptake of HIV treatment and prevention tools.

### **Media Cafés are expanding Africa’s network of informed and engaged health and science journalists.**

- **A growing cadre of informed and engaged journalists:** At the heart of the Media Science Café program is a cadre of ~ 250 African journalists who consistently attend cafés and report with depth and understanding on science and health topics. Their engagement has translated into thousands of media reports with the potential to impact knowledge, behavior, perception and policy. These journalists were uniquely poised to ensure accurate and nuanced coverage of the fast-unfolding COVID-19 pandemic and cholera outbreaks in several café countries. They will be a critical resource for emerging health issues, including health and climate, emerging pathogens and more.

*“Journalists are already looking to the future and exploring ways to keep HIV and COVID-19 stories alive. They are also looking at the looming crises brought on by climate change.”*

- **Combatting misinformation:** Café journalists are well-prepared to sift through scientific data, distinguish credible sources and communicate accurate information. AVAC and the café conveners recognize that the key to good science and health coverage is sustained engagement with a stable cadre of journalists who can follow complicated science and get the story right time after time.
- **Editor engagement:** The Media Science Café program recognized early on that the buy-in and support of editors is critical to success. In addition to monthly cafés, the program hosts regular Editors’ Breakfast Meetings and engages in one-on-one outreach. This relationship-building has paid dividends in the quality of reporting emerging from targeted media houses.

*“Over time, Cafés have played a pivotal role in elevating the status of health reporting within editorial teams. Editors now recognize the value of health reporting in capturing audience attention, fostering public understanding and addressing critical issues.” —Kenya convener*

- **Cultivating the next generation of journalists:** To ensure the program’s sustainability, supporting the next generation of health and science journalists is essential. Veteran reporters have valuable knowledge and skills to share, and mentoring younger journalists helps ensure the transfer of knowledge. Each country program has instituted a formal mentoring program that enlists and supports senior journalists to work with junior journalists on the craft of journalism and the particular needs of science and health reporting. Conveners report that the mentoring programs are paying off; when younger journalists can rely on more senior journalists to help ensure accuracy and nuance, they are more confident in their work.
- **Ongoing training and support:** AVAC’s support for journalists doesn’t stop with Media Science Cafés. It is augmented by topic-specific regional trainings in East and Southern Africa, global media trainings at key conferences, and ongoing support and technical assistance provided for participants through information sharing, contacts and a virtual science/research “help desk”.

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***Media Science Cafés recognize and support local, independent journalism.***

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- **Independent journalist associations:** To ensure editorial independence, the café programs are convened by independent journalist associations that have standing with media houses and access to a wide array of sources. They also confer credibility to freelance journalists, an increasingly significant media segment in many countries.
- **National reach:** Cafés aim to communicate health and science stories to regional communities, not just capital cities. As such, the program intentionally casts a wide net to identify journalists who will reach a range of audiences. Café journalists include those who work for major media houses and are based in the capitals, as well as community radio, freelancers, bloggers and online media people who report in local languages and reach into smaller cities and rural areas.
- **Local adaptation:** Local adaptation is critical to ensure buy-in and engagement from journalists, media houses and local experts. As such, each country program is constructed to meet its audience’s unique local needs. Journalists outside capitals often have fewer opportunities to interact with experts and even fewer opportunities for training, but they play a critical role in sharing information communities need. Each program conducts regional cafés in local languages to help fill this gap. AVAC, with support from the Sabin Vaccine Institute, developed a Translation Index of key science and health terms in 10 local languages to support local language efforts.
- **Going beyond print:** A decade ago, the cafés focused on print and broadcast media from major media houses; today, they have expanded to reflect the changing media landscape. The cafés have all welcomed online journalists and those working across social media platforms. The café conveners have also embraced training to help those from more traditional media backgrounds transition or add online media as a key skill set. The Kenya team has led the way with several mobile journalism trainings.

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***Media Science Cafés give local journalists access to global experts and ensure communities are at the center of the conversation.***

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- **Civil society and community experts:** AVAC ensures the inclusion of civil society and community members in every café as equal experts to researchers, implementers and policy makers. These voices provide critical context to the story being told and bring vital questions and a nuanced understanding of science to help journalists find the focus of stories. Often, these experts speak in local languages and provide much-needed perspective. The Zimbabwe team notes, “We count as success the stories that continue to be covered in vernacular languages and the interest in ensuring that community voices also feature in research stories.”
- **Leveraging virtual connections:** In the early days of the COVID pandemic, the program was adapted to include online ‘cross border’ cafés, allowing journalists to interact with a broader set of regional and global expert scientists, implementers and policy makers. While virtual programming will never replace face-to-face meetings, it has allowed for significant program expansion and led to a more diversified pool of local journalists. It has also improved networking across countries, including social media connections

that have led to regional story ideas and access to a broader array of sources from the region. These collaborations have been particularly helpful to freelance journalists.

- **Expanding partnerships:** The COVID pandemic also prompted the cafés to forge new partnerships – including with Ministries of Health, implementers, local vaccine programs and regional and global health experts. Many of these relationships are built on the longstanding work of the cafés, and Ministries of Health, in particular, see café journalists as a trustworthy group of science-trained journalists with whom to share information.

**Case study:** In early 2024, Zimbabwe was grappling with outbreaks of cholera and polio and a rising tide of vaccine hesitancy. The Ministry of Health and WHO contacted the Zimbabwe café conveners to explain their response and ensure the accurate reporting needed to build community trust and support.

## **Why AVAC?**

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- AVAC effectively builds bridges between science and community through communication. In the world of HIV and global health equity writ large, there is often a gap between science and community perspectives. Communication across diverse stakeholder groups is essential to ensure that user needs inform research, product development and delivery systems and that research findings and emerging evidence are shared with communities, advocates and implementers to enable effective use.
- AVAC is a trusted and credible convener with a unique ability to forge connections between the media, scientists, civil society, industry, communities, academics and policy makers. AVAC has established trusted, influential and durable relationships with various stakeholders – from policy makers to civil society advocates, industry to academics, product developers to program implementers. We help to shape, uplift and leverage an ecosystem of diverse and committed partners and coalitions that collectively advance HIV prevention and global health equity.
- AVAC can leverage its over 25 years of expertise in HIV advocacy, research engagement and evidence translation to inform and educate the community about related issues focused on advancing global health equity, including pandemic preparedness, vaccination programming, sexual and reproductive health, and climate and health.