



Red and raunchy

One tabloid has lasted for nearly three years in Uganda, Ben Opolot looks at why the Red Pepper has achieved longevity.

The headlines are sensational, exaggerated and yes, loaded with sexual innuendo. And the readers love it. Otherwise how would one explain the rapid growth of Uganda's latest, and by far most successful, tabloid newspaper *Red Pepper*?

Tabloids have been in - and out of - Uganda for quite a while but it was not until 2003 that tabloid journalism took on a different meaning. Up until then, each entrant had come with puff and pomp but often never lived to see its first anniversary.

The *Red Pepper* has been around for nearly three years. This is the longest any raunchy and sensational Ugandan tabloid has lived.

The newspaper market had been dominated by "serious" newspapers that kept away from trivial in favour of serious content. Not so much because they did not believe that the tabloid approach would bring new readers and an extra dollar. It was more the media law and the cultural environment that dictated their content.

The leading media house, The *New Vision* newspaper, was - and still is - fully owned by the state and had a public role mandate. In some ways it was seen as an extension of government, so trivial and sensational reporting or any tendency towards the banal and the emotional was seen as unpatriotic and unprofessional.

Red Pepper hit the streets in 2002 as a weekly. Its success was instant. It moved on to a bi-weekly within a couple of months and it is now a daily, that competes with - if not outcompetes - the mainstream papers. The "highbrow" papers have had to redraw their strategies and have copied most, if not all, of the content and presentation style of the *Red Pepper*. Now the line separating the tabloids and the serious newspapers is ever thinner as each side goes out of its way to capture and retain the readers and the advertiser's dollar.

But what is it in the tabloids that attracts Ugandan readers in droves? And it is not just the young or the middle class that enjoy the *Red Pepper*'s fairly predictable sleaze, gossip, sex, celebrity news and scandal. The paper circulates in all parts of the country, including remote rural locations where one would expect folks to be conservative.

Perhaps because poverty and unfulfilled

promises from politicians are so pervasive, stories on sports, mating dogs, drunken politicians, half-dressed teenagers, couples having sex at a beach, news of the latest model of a Beamer or Merc, are a welcome diversion.

With its rich mix of content written in an entertaining fashion, complete with local jargon and street language, the readers keep coming back. Crime stories, political stories with a sexual and scandalous spin, anything that digs deep into the personal and private realm is tabloid content. They also pry into the family and portray in-laws as monsters out to snuff out marital bliss. Sex is presented as a militaristic encounter between man and woman. For instance, in the the *Red Pepper*, a man "bombs" and "vanquishes" the woman.

It borrow current concepts and events and gives them a sexual twist. For instance, a woman's breasts are referred to as "the twin towers" (remember September 11 and the World Trade Centre?); her vagina as "Kandahar", that Afghan city that bore the brunt of the American fighter planes after September 11.

A penis is referred to as a "pestle" - the tool that Ugandan rural people use for pounding groundnuts. Alternatively, it is called a "whooper" or a "shaft" that can "drill" the hardest "hole" to draw "water" from a "well" no matter how deep. The man is, of course, the hero in all these stories.

Civil society groups have protested this imagery, arguing that this portrayal of male-female relations promotes violence against women. However, some say the tabloids have lifted the veil off the taboo topic of sex and helped Ugandan society open up the private domain to public scrutiny.

Be that as it may, the Ugandan law is far from embracing tabloids. For instance, a proposed bill on pornography seeks to outlaw publication of any picture that exposes a woman's thighs, breasts, navel, buttocks, and private parts. Publishing a picture of a female athlete will be a breach of law.

That might explain why most tabloids, including *Red Pepper*, have redefined themselves alongside the mainstream newspapers such as the *New Vision*, *The Monitor* and the *Weekly Observer*.

Now *Red Pepper* has relegated "raw" sex stories to the inside pages and put sensational political

reports on the front pages. Observers say the paper is relaunching itself as a cross between tabloid and serious newspaper to become a newsloid.

That search for a new identity might explain why the *Red Pepper* appears now to concentrate on politics. Some have even charged that the paper is bankrolled by powerful politicians from the ruling party, the Movement, to publish propaganda and smear campaigns against government opponents. Perhaps that is one reason why sources of its political reports are more likely to be anonymous or "highly-placed".

But how has the public received the tabloids, particularly the arrival of the *Red Pepper*? Yes, when it first hit the streets, an uproar was heard from the moral right, concerned parents associations, from parliament, from the pulpits and from the bench. There were street demonstrations, petitions in court and motions in parliament but they did not last long.

Why? The readers knew what they wanted and no one would tell them what was good for them. So they supported the paper and bought it off the street week in week out.

Red Pepper was also smart in its PR. It presented itself and its message as a moral crusade against sexual hypocrisy and moral corruption. It even ran banners on its pages warning of the dangers of unprotected sex and the virtues of condoms, abstinence and faithfulness.

Media owners have not mounted significant or co-ordinated responses. Most of them simply increased their leisure content and so-called human interest stories to try to claw back their readers. Condemning *Red Pepper* is construed to mean a fear of competition.

Most journalists associations also argued that tabloidisation was an extension of the freedom of expression and would advance the cause of democracy. Any condemnation of tabloid journalism was seen as inviting government to censorship.

Whatever the case, tabloid culture seems to have taken root in Uganda. Although the *Red Pepper* has redesigned itself to look more up-market, and polished its content a little bit, that has only created a gap for readers used to a "red-hot" diet of sexual content. ■