

TABLOIDISATION WAS A HOT TOPIC AT THE AFRICA MEDIA LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE. 'TODAY, THE MERE MENTION OF THE RED PEPPER AT A DRINKING JOINT IN UGANDA IS ENOUGH TO GET PEOPLE BEHAVING PROPERLY,' SAYS EDITOR RUGYENDO.

by Francis Mdlongwa

In Uganda, the *Red Pepper* tabloid has quadrupled its circulation in five years and its youthful managing editor, Arinaitwe Rugyendo, bubbles with confidence as he speaks of a "revolution" sweeping the Ugandan media market and spearheaded by his newspaper.

Red Pepper is not just another tabloid thriving on sensationalism and scandal, but is living up to its name by being a fresh newspaper that is making a difference to the lives of young Ugandans.

The newspaper is not only transforming the Ugandan news media's content and making it more understandable, interesting and relevant to readers, but is reshaping the way news is covered by becoming more accessible and "participatory".

At least this is the view of Rugyendo, 29, who says the rise of *Red Pepper* spells trouble for Africa's traditional print and broadcast media still steeped in "coursework journalism" of lecturing audiences and dishing out knowledge, information and news from a privileged "we know it" position.

"Today, the mere mention of *Red Pepper* at a drinking joint in Uganda is enough to get people behaving properly. *Red Pepper* has assumed the role of Mr Tell It All. It is the national policeman," he said.

"There is a (growing) belief that what other media fear to say will always find its way into *Red Pepper*. There is a growing belief that *Red Pepper* has the most credible information on politics and intelligence!"

But exactly how and why is *Red Pepper* different from other Ugandan tabloids, or the country's traditional mainstream media? For the record, the tabloid's modest circulation of just 6 000 copies a week at its launch in 2001 has grown to more than 25 000 now and the newspaper has become a daily.

"This has been achieved by looking at the paper's clients not merely as recipients of information, but as contributors to what the paper packages. We call this 'participatory publishing'. We allow the readers to be part of the news they are supposed to buy and read."

A participatory revolution

I later emailed Rugyendo, asking him to expand on this theme for inclusion in this write-up. "A small peasant will call in from the deepest part of the village any time in the night and report to us what has happened around him. You

will find the story in the subsequent editions... there is a feeling that *Red Pepper* editors are like 'police', always there for them and ready to receive your call and have your story run without the bureaucracy that comes with the official (and mainstream) media and its legalese."

To an extent, *Red Pepper* appears to be fostering citizen journalism – currently being practised by some online newspapers that are allowing ordinary people with Internet access to act as reporters who tell their own stories from their localities.

The impact of media's tabloidisation of news – the generally sensationalist coverage of what some media analysts see as trivial stories that focus on sex, scandal, salacious details of people's private lives, etc – on the media market and society was just one highlight of several media management topics debated by the summit.

An annual event, the conference was attended by more than 30 leading African media owners, chief editors and media scholars, giving them a rare opportunity to network at the highest level and to share experiences and ideas on how they are confronting a broad range of challenges that face their media companies in their regions.

Although tabloidisation of news has long troubled mainstream publishers in the developed North who have seen their profits whittled down by the 'alternative' tabloids, the phenomenon is relatively new in a reforming and liberalising Africa.

But as happened in the North, African bosses of established media companies are increasingly seeing this new reportage as also threatening their media firms' bottom lines and very survival, and are seeking ways of combating or co-existing with it.

While some media scholars see tabloids as pandering to the lowest common denominator of public taste, others see them as filling a critical public information void left by self-centred traditional media whose reportage does not address the needs and wants of ordinary people.

In Rugyendo's words: the old ways (of reporting) of the media were the preserve of an elite minority and they served to exclude the voices and concerns of the majority population, particularly the poor and women. Tabloidisation has therefore sought to liberate the mainstream media from this ideological backwardness to start seriously addressing aspects of society that it has traditionally ignored.

In fact, Rugyendo argues that the advent of *Red Pepper*

in Uganda has not only "broadened and democratised the content of the media" by creating new readers, but has forced the mainstream media to adopt tabloid-style journalism to survive and become relevant to society.

The trick? News media must present short, sharp and crisp news stories which deal with ordinary people's daily lives; their triumphs and tribulations and their joys and sorrows; and when running political stories these need to be 'sanitised' to make sense of them for the people.

"*Red Pepper*, which kicked off as a weekly in 2001 and went on to become a bi-weekly before graduating to the daily it is, fits the description of tabloid and then goes on to defy that very description," Rugyendo argued.

"The defiance was and is mainly meant to achieve a revolutionary flexible response to market needs... Where will you find a paper with titillating tidbits of the First Family (in Uganda), when the next pages discuss the perennial problem of cattle-rustling in eastern Uganda...?"

He recalled that at the launch of *Red Pepper* – which one media analyst has branded 'too hot to handle' – "professional moralists" had ganged up against *Red Pepper*, accusing it of peddling pornography. "Many failed to see that the paper offered what other publications had neglected: the fearless expression of informed opinion and analysis blended in the light stuff."

"To the present day, 'Intelligence Briefing' (one of *Red Pepper's* opinion pages) still creates the impression that it is written by the country's spy chiefs; (but) it is simply the informed opinion and analyses of *Red Pepper's* editors, period. And because 'Intelligence Briefing' has predicted several events with almost prophetic foresight, suspicion of direct linkages to intelligence abound."

"The net result of this packaging is that a priest could buy *Red Pepper* with a semi-nude picture on top, which he may or may not like, because he has to get to those other columns inside, which he thinks are vital for his own information, or for his flock."

"Another peculiar aspect is that *Red Pepper* has not





because these aspects constitute what is shaping the majority of readers', listeners' and viewers' views of the world. The media in Africa must adapt to these trends...(and) shift from coursework journalism to reality journalism, where we must respond to the market needs without compromising our (journalistic) principles."

Rugyendo's upbeat mood on *Red Pepper* was shared by some conference delegates, who saw mainstream media as failing audiences because of various factors, including issues concerning ownership of media firms, media's commercialisation of news and media's quests for profit.

Debasing discourse

But many delegates, predominantly owners of long-established media groups, felt tabloidisation of news debased public discourse and therefore threatened democracy and the ethical conduct of the journalism profession itself.

Makerere University's journalism school head Peter Mwesige, a former editor of a national newspaper in Uganda, criticised tabloids and market-driven journalism for diminishing the profession's public service role.

"My quarrel with tabloids is that they rarely interrogate the social problems they cover, (and) they have a potential to depoliticise society by robbing people of a forum through which to engage in public debate on key issues," he argued.

"The fact that there is a market for tabloids should not be confused with whether they always add to the education of the citizenry, the key public service role for which the news media enjoy special protection. Unfortunately, the growing success of tabloids in several media markets is tempting serious newspapers to take the same down-market road."

He argued that news media "are not like any other business, and journalism is not simply another commodity on the market subject to all the dictates of the market place.

"The worldwide constitutional protections enjoyed by journalism are grounded in the public service role of the news media and not so much in the rights of media owners

to make a profit, although there is nothing criminal or illegitimate about that too."

He argued that the survival of democracy depended on the "quality of information and communication" provided by the media, and sounded a warning on tabloidisation:

"In the name of giving the market what it wants, stories on fashion, local and international celebrities, company promotions, and society parties now compete with serious journalism in newspapers, while the radio stations are content with talk shows and news flashes to spice their music. Important subjects that are not interesting are often ignored, while journalists come under more pressure to cover interesting, but not necessarily important, subjects."

He saw market-driven journalism and tabloidisation as as much of a threat to democracy and quality journalism as were the corporatisation of the media, globalisation, stifling government legislation and policies, lack of resources and training in media houses.

The debate on the future of African journalism in the face of tabloidisation and new competition from new media such as Internet journalism is far from resolved as Africa searches for appropriate responses in a rapidly changing and globalising world.

The Nairobi summit also examined issues such as strategies of growing youth markets by Africa's print, online and broadcast media; how to build cross-border African media investment; how to integrate opportunities from new media and whether Kenya's multi-media giant Nation Group, owners of several newspapers and a radio and television station, is compromising, co-existing or confronting the government in its quest for survival. ■

The conference was hosted by the Sol Plaatje Media Leadership Institute and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

The papers

Rugyendo, A. 2006. "The impact of tabloidisation on the media, markets and society."

Mwesige, PG. 2006. "African quality journalism under siege: what's to be done?"

stuck to reporting what celebrities do but has, in fact, gone on to turn little-known achievers into celebrities." Rugyendo estimated Africa's youths at 500 million out of a population of 800 million and said of the youth market: "Our (news) products must seek to talk to them and in turn they must feel the product is theirs and not ours..."

"With this kind of generation, do we (as editors) ever stop to imagine the per capita movie access in Africa? What about the per capita Internet access in Africa? How about the per capita discotheque access in Africa? What of the per capita fun consumption in Africa?

"These are the market needs realities we are facing