



‘It’s our paper’

Despite being state-controlled, the Bulawayo tabloid uMthunywa is a popular read for people who feel alienated from the Zimbabwean government.

... ————— by Hayes Mabwezara —————

U*Mthunywa*, a vernacular paper for Bulawayo and the Matabeleland region was created in 1985, as a state-owned paper. In 1993 the paper folded due to viability problems linked to political interference and its failure to provide an alternative voice to the mainstream English newspapers.

On 4 July 2004, *uMthunywa* re-emerged under a new editor with a new market-driven editorial thrust anchored on the values of tabloid journalism. It took the lead as the prototypical representative of tabloid journalism in Zimbabwe, gaining popularity as a paper that prints gossip and human-interest stories that the ‘man’ in the street can relate to and identify with.

Although selling nationally, *uMthunywa*, by virtue of being an isiNdebele paper, has wide readership in the Ndebele-speaking provinces of Zimbabwe and Bulawayo, where it is based, takes the lead in circulation.

The content

uMthunya prioritises social issues related to ordinary people – this is evident in its pictorial content and its sources. Coverage hinges on township gossip, rumour-mongering and other unconventional stories peppered with idiomatic and slang expressions. The storylines capitalise on unadulterated exaggerations characteristic of the yellow journalism of 1920s America.

The bulk of its stories appear to defy logic and normality. One notes for example the following stories: “Isela limila amathamathisi emhlane” (Tomatoes grow on thief’s backside, 24 September-1 October 2004); “Ubabhemi utholakala etshaye isathongwana embhedeni” (Donkey found fast asleep in bed, 3-10 December 2004).

The use of the vernacular is central to projecting the paper as a sensationalist medium. Ndebele tends to be more brazen and sensational than English. The paper appears to reinvent expressions

and words, which resonate with colloquial street talk, for example: “Ijazi lika mkwenyana” literally meaning “son-in-law’s jacket” (4-11 June 2004) being used as a euphemism for a condom.

uMthunywa also covers very little of political parties and government activities. For example, in the 20 issues I studied, there were only three political stories: one on the dangers of political violence during the senatorial elections (29 October-4 November 2004); a ZANU (PF) senatorial election campaign advert (25-31 March 2005); and a comment on the senatorial elections (1-4 April 2005). This is particularly striking given that the paper re-emerged in a politically-charged environment that saw, among many other events, the 17th amendment of the Zimbabwean constitution.

Several stories expose the private lives of public personalities and celebrities. A notable example involves Tapuwa Kapini, then a goalie for prominent football club Highlanders based in Bulawayo,



whose involvement in street fights was published in a story titled: "Ukapini wehlula abafundisi" (Church ministers gave up on Kapini, 1-7 April 2005).

Readers' identities

Although the readers I interviewed for my study came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, they broadly construed themselves as Ndebele. This points to the fluidity of identities in the region mainly shaped by socialisation, intermarriages and the influence of the geo-political space. For all the interviewees, socialisation in Matabeleland (Bulawayo in particular) has played a key role in framing their identities around the Ndebele ethnic group.

This collective identity influences the readers' relationship to the broader political formation as they read *uMthunywa* as a distinct marginal group with a shared identity akin to an ethno-nationalism that resonates with their political behaviour. A pervasive feeling of disillusionment and marginalisation is marked among the readers. This attitude resonates with the general and sustained climate of fear that emerged with the immediate post-independence war that took place in the region. Notably, the readers' conscious and selective consumption of the print media is structured by their regional identity and relationship to the broader political formation. They are unified by their scepticism toward sections of the mainstream press as news sources and their resolve to selectively consume newspapers.

Although the paper is read across a wide demographic spectrum, it is clear that the lack of interest in political issues among some of its readers, particularly those in the lower classes, is a key factor for its selection.

Meanings

Although the reading of *uMthunywa* varies, the paper is seen as an alternative way of knowing about the world that is not offered in other media, particularly the state-controlled press. The readers characterised the style of *uMthunywa* as fun, exciting or entertaining precisely because, among other things, it carries stories they enjoy, which enable them to symbolically escape from the conditions of their day-to-day lives. Thus the content of *uMthunywa* provides a platform for symbolic distancing, imaginatively taking some distance from the spatial-temporal conditions of everyday life (as discussed by Strelitz 2005: 79). This is particularly so in the light of the fact that the participants in this study expressed unequivocal fatigue with the mainstream press, a scenario compounded by their general disillusionment and feeling of neglect by the power bloc.

This was clearly articulated in the following personal interviews with one reader, Sibekezele:

Interviewer: Looking at the copies of *uMthunywa* that we have with us here, which particular stories do you have interest in?

Sibekezele: I like stories that provide humour and are bizarre, like this one which talks of a father-in-law who flogged his son-in-law for spilling his illicit opaque beer, also this one which talks of a woman who stripped naked when she lost her bucket in a water queue in eNtumbane. You can't avoid laughing after reading such stories. I also like Zenzele Ndebele's column "Asixoxeni ngezomculo" (Let's talk about music), it highlights the biases in the Zimbabwean music industry in a very humorous manner, particularly the skewed support given to the industry by the government... Zenzele also graphically describes what happens at musical shows, you amazingly find your self cruising in the gig, picturing all sorts of happenings – you know what I mean! (chuckles). This is what you don't find in the other papers.

In terms of coverage of public figures, the

readers naturally wished to know intimate and personal details about celebrities. The closeness they feel to celebrities is underlined by their perception that stars are public property whose lives can and should be scrutinised by their fans. Some readers, however, felt that the paper goes way too far in its intrusion into celebrities' lives.

It also emerged from the readers that the content of *uMthunywa* reinforces their already-existing beliefs about different kinds of issues, like witchcraft and other kinds of paranormal phenomena they live with. This confirms Rosnow and Fine's insight that "truth is only accepted when it is consistent with one's frame of reference" (cited in Bird 1992: 121). One of the interviewees aptly captured this by reflecting on how *uMthunywa* "mirrors" his personal lived-circumstances.

Dube: The stories do reflect our society and I believe they are true. Sometimes I hear of the stories before they even appear in the paper. If you remember well, I said in our discussion the other day, that I witnessed the story of the brothers who came all the way from Tsholotsho to ferry the body of their deceased sister for burial on a donkey-drawn cart. It's also the same about this story of a traditional healer who does his job over the phone. I know someone who can testify. I think I get access to these experiences because of my background; I was born and bred in Magwegwe Township, so I'm a township boy. The stories covered in *uMthunywa* are really true, and they constitute our daily talk and experience in Magwegwe.

The majority of the readers don't express disbelief in the paranormal occurrences covered in the paper. For them, these constitute real experiences. Witchcraft, for instance, is seen as part of their culture and so when they read about the stories, they are not at all taken aback.

One important theme that emerged from the interviews is the apparent influence of the folkloric tradition that runs through most of the stories in *uMthunywa*. The readers noted that the stories follow the narrative conventions and formulae they already know from their cultural repertoires and this was instrumental in drawing their attention to the content of the paper. One reader said: "I really enjoy reading stories in *uMthunywa*; they make me feel as though my grandmother is telling me a story because of the way the stories are written. The stories are written in a different way, it's as though you are going through a folk narrative."

The fact that the stories constitute part of the popular daily discourses of the readers also emerged as fundamental to the cohesion of the readers' marginal group-identity. Thus, it emerged that some of the readers sometimes read the paper in groups, laughing together and drawing parallel examples from real life experiences.

Political significance

Although no overtly political questions were asked in the interviews, some political views did emerge, revolving mainly around distrust of and alienation from the establishment. These political attitudes are deeply rooted in the readers' relationship to the broader political formation and constitute part of the reason why they prefer *uMthunywa*. Many of those who discussed politics expressed a strong belief that the government had a negative attitude towards the people of Matabeleland. The majority

of readers felt alienated from mainstream politics, believing that the government is conspiring against the people of Matabeleland.

Given *uMthunywa* readers' feelings of discontent with the power bloc and its institutions, it is arguable that their interest in *uMthunywa*, in part, represents the failure of other societal institutions, among them the more prestigious news organisations and traditional political organisations, to address adequately issues of vital concern to members of the public (see Ornebring & Jonsson 2004: 293).

One may further contend that *uMthunywa* offers "ammunition" against what is seen as a biased establishment that denigrates the Ndebele people. It is important to note that the frustrations felt by *uMthunywa* readers stem from their position in some kind of underclass that perceives itself as unable to do anything significant about events in the mainstream. Clearly, the reading of *uMthunywa* is symptomatic of a deeper social malaise in Bulawayo and Matabeleland at large – precisely the political alienation experienced by the readers.

Language

The fact that *uMthunywa*'s editorial content is in isiNdebele is undoubtedly key to its consumption as language naturally locates individuals in particular cultures, placing them firmly in their own realities (Kramseh 1998: 65-66). This point was widely acknowledged by participants in the study with one reader commenting: "You see, *uMthunywa* is in our mother language and, traditionally, language is the carrier of culture. We, therefore, see the paper as reviving our cultural values through its use of pure isiNdebele and proverbs which explore issues that we, the poor of Matabeleland, experience. I think this is important because even my own mother at times asks me to read the paper for her, this has not been happening before – it's our paper and we should be very grateful for its availability and pray that it doesn't disappear again."

The language thus works towards the cultural cohesion of the readers. Further, the language also expresses some issues in a graphic and sensational way that cannot be matched by English. It achieves this largely through departures from official, formal language. One reader observed that the paper re-invents phrases and comes up with catchy and interesting ones like "Idlalichatsha" (18-24 March 2005), used in the literal sense, as a euphemistic title for mischievous women who prey on married men. More obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to partake in the discourses of the paper.

One may conclude that *uMthunywa* offers the people of Bulawayo something they do not find in other Zimbabwean print media. The cornerstone of its attractiveness is plainly that it deals with issues experienced by the readers in their lived circumstances – the socio-political conditions that have alienated them from the macro-political life of the nation. The use of the vernacular sharpens the paper's tabloid form and appeals to their identity as Ndebele people. The paper thus constitutes an "alternative mediated public sphere" for readers who feel alienated from the power bloc and dominant frames of reference. It remains contestable therefore, whether the tabloid press has no place in the journalistic terrain as its critics argue.

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