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

uMthunywa 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 idiom 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 isa-thongwana 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 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 culture.

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

Sibekezile: I like stories that provide humour and are interesting, 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 reading such stories. It is not a different experience to the one I experienced as a young daughter. Zenzele Ndebele’s column “Asixoxeni ngezomculo” has enabled more people, including those not so educated, to be 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 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 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. Most obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to be familiar with 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 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 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. Most obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to be familiar with 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 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 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. Most obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to be familiar with 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 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 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. Most obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to be familiar with 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 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 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. Most obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to be familiar with 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 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 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. Most obvious, however, is the fact that the language has enabled more people, including those not so comfortable in reading English, to be familiar with the discourses of the paper.

References


Rhodes Journalism Review 27, September 2007 55