



Mali youth listen to the **news in rap**

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Female journalist Togola Hawa Séméga is on a mission: to bring objective news to the young people of Mali and to unite them. She launched a fun concept. With a creative mix of journalism, rap and humour she involves young people with social situations. With help from Free Press Unlimited, Kunafoni WebTV has been a success since the pilot in 2016.

Birgitta van der Linden

Rap is a popular music genre in Mali. Words, woven together rhythmically in rapid tempo, accompanied by a beat, appeal especially to the youth of Mali who make up the majority of the Malian population. Seventy percent of the population is under 35 years old.

Dangerous for journalists

Malian youth have limited access to information. Mobile phone reception is often poor and subscriptions are expensive. Many journalists give biased information based on opinion instead of fact. In northern Mali, occupied by Islamic rebels, journalists are regularly threatened, kidnapped and even murdered.

In 2013, two French journalists were murdered. In 2016, a Malian journalist disappeared. Since the election campaign in 2018, the police have invaded media organisations on several occasions and multiple journalists have been arrested. Since 2012, Mali has dropped from the 25th to the 115th ranking on the Press Freedom Index.

Rapping weatherman

Female journalist Togola Hawa Séméga was born in Mali. It pained her to see her country falling apart as a result of civil war. The provision of information was virtually non-existent. For more than two years she had been independently publishing articles online about the political situation in her country.

Séméga received no support from fellow journalists. She hardly managed to reach the young people she wants to reach. When it came to listening to the news, there was a general fatigue

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among young people. In addition, traditional media paid almost no attention to young people's issues.

She felt the strength and courage to do something for her country, but didn't quite know how. Until she travelled to America in 2015 and was inspired by a rapping weatherman on television.

Séméga realised she could get the attention of the Malian youth and get them to take action by combining the most popular music genre in the country with information provided through image instead of text.

The concept for Kunafoni WebTV was born.

Opposition in Mali

Back in Mali, Séméga is determined to develop and implement the concept. Séméga: "I wanted to show the Malian youth that they have opportunities. The future of Mali is in the hands of the young, but more and more young Malians want to leave the country. They feel they have no opportunities in Mali and that they are being silenced. With Kunafoni WebTV I want to show young people that they can innovate, create, dream, but even better: that they can really realise their dreams."

Séméga approached up and coming rappers and explained the idea to them. They were enthusiastic, but she also met with resistance.

"Some of the more famous rappers from Mali did everything they could to sabotage the Kunafoni programmes. Fewer and fewer people wanted to work with us because they did not want to be associated with inexperienced, unknown rappers. They did not understand the concept, because Kunafoni gives all young people, not just rappers, a voice," she said.

Besides that, Kunafoni WebTV could not count on support from the government or organisations in the country that are there specifically for youth-driven start-ups.

Support from Free Press Unlimited

Séméga first came into contact with Free Press Unlimited in March 2016. She met with programme coordinator Jens Kiesheyer.

Kiesheyer: "As a former radio journalist, I have put everything I know into developing a distinctive format for Kunafoni. Rap news in the West African countries of Senegal and Ivory Coast is completely subjective, a reflection of the opinion of the rappers. Kunafoni chooses to make independent and impartial news; that is how it distinguishes itself and that is why this concept has succeeded."

Local and international trainers

The rappers at Kunafoni are trained in the use of journalistic techniques such as the right of reply, storytelling, video productions using a smartphone and research. Free Press Unlimited uses suitable local and international trainers. The organisation financially supports the production of the shows and contributes to Kunafoni's other expenses.

Kiesheyer: "We have regular contact to discuss how Kunafoni can become financially independent, without that being detrimental to the objective and impartial news coverage."

Homosexuality is taboo

The youth of Mali are aware that all political and social issues are discussed on Kunafoni WebTV. Séméga: "They are very open to discussions, especially in combination with rap. This appears to be the best way to stimulate and raise awareness. It is a language that they understand. They are informed and sensitised to many issues that directly or indirectly affect them. The challenge lies in the fact that we sometimes have difficulty finding people who want to discuss certain topics on our channel. Like homosexuality: the biggest taboo in Mali."

Kunafoni WebTV: huge success

Since March 2016 there has been a weekly news report on Kunafoni.com, which focuses on news items important for that week. These are treated from a young person's perspective in the two main official languages of Mali: Bambara and French.

Once a month, Kunafoni WebTV organises a rap debate in which young people discuss matters that are important to them. The Malian youth are also given the opportunity to talk about various topics on the Facebook page that has more than 30,000 followers.

In February 2018, the rap news programme won Le Prix Francophone de L'innovation dans les Médias (Francophone Prize for Media Innovation) for second-most innovative media format in the French-speaking world. They received this award because of the unique, fun way they provide independent news and initiate and facilitate discussions between young people about social problems. Negotiations are currently taking place with the national broadcaster ORTM to broadcast the weekly rap news on television.

Séméga: "Young Malians are now learning that they can come up with solutions for the problems they continuously face."

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