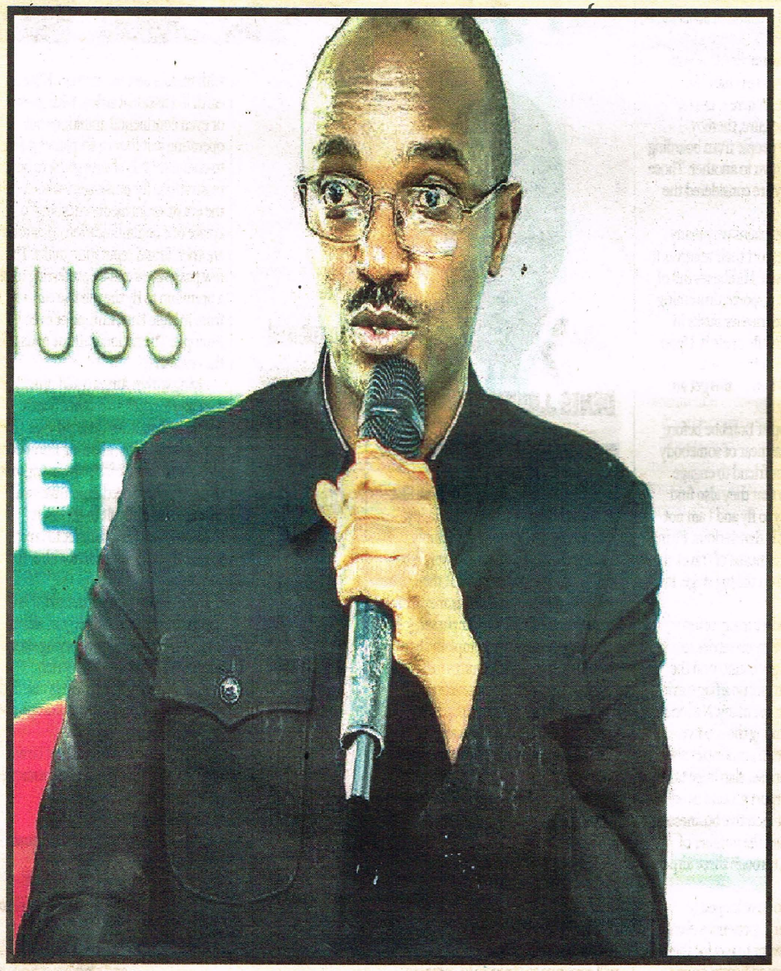
Dr Rugyendo built institutions and returned to scholarship with honour



Dr Arinaitwe Rugyendo

There are lives that submit quietly to history, accepting its rough edges as fate, and there are lives that resist lives that argue back, reshape circumstance and insist on meaning where deprivation once ruled.

Such lives do not move in straight lines. They curve through hardship, controversy, courage, error, reinvention and, in rare moments, quiet intellectual triumph. Renowned media personality **ARINAITWE RUGYENDO** belongs to this latter category of human achievement and just a few days ago, he defended his doctorate of philosophy titled: From Print to Digital; Evolution, Adoption and Contribution of ePapers in the Ugandan Press.

As **Alex Atwemereireho** writes, his thesis on January 30, 2026 is not just an ornamental credential.

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Milestone

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Rugyendo's doctoral milestone matters precisely because of where the journey began. Born into conditions of severe material deprivation, orphaned of a father at three months, raised by a primary school teacher mother whose modest salary bore the weight of an entire household, his earliest classroom was survival itself.

The political violence and ethnic turbulence of the early 1980s were not distant national events but intimate intrusions burned homes, forced displacement, whispered fear and the quiet resilience of a mother determined to educate her children against all odds. In that crucible, character was not theorized; it was learned.

The Catholic seminary at Kitabi refined what hardship had already shaped. Silence trained reflection; ritual disciplined impulse; study revealed the emancipatory power of thought. His decision to leave priesthood was not an abandonment of faith but an ethical choice rooted in filial duty, an early indication of a mind that weighed responsibility over personal aspiration.

Choosing Makerere University over the cassock was not a retreat from vocation but a redirection toward a broader apostolate.

His entry into the media coincided with one of Uganda's most volatile political moments. As a freelance journalist, literally walking stories into the *Daily Monitor* newsroom, he demonstrated a combination of audacity and instinct that would become a career signature. Securing a candid interview with a serving brigadier on the now-infamous Besigye letter was not simply a scoop; it was an early signal of a refusal to fear proximity to power. The Kanungu tragedy of March, 2000, which claimed more than 700 lives, further revealed the moral compass at work.

Journalism, from the outset, was not merely employment; it was social utility.

At just 23 years in 2001, when caution would have been understandable, disruption became a deliberate choice. Resigning from a secure editorial position from *Daily Monitor*, pooling approximately Shs 700,000 with equally daring colleagues while armed with borrowed computers and unpaid optimism, he co-founded Red Pepper.

Uganda's media landscape, long dominated by sober, elite-driven orthodoxy, was forced to confront a radically different model. *Red Pepper* spoke to the personal, the hidden, the uncomfortable. It was tabloid journalism, certainly, but it was also a democratization of attention in a society where public narratives had long been curated from above.

Arinaitwe Rugyendo (L) during his PhD defence

The backlash was immediate and fierce. Arrests, prosecutions, moral crusades and international scrutiny followed. Yet it was here that a deeper philosophy of press freedom emerged.

When the paper was dragged to court over allegations of corrupting public morals, the state failed to sustain its case. The prosecutions collapsed. Circulation, however, surged. Within 18 months, the publication broke even, and by 2005 it had acquired its own printing press without bank loans.

Beyond media, his work intersected decisively with Uganda's governance failures. His condemnation of corruption, particularly in the importation of expired drugs and substandard medical supplies, is grounded in documented reality.

So, when he speaks of lives lost in hospitals, he speaks as a citizen confronting evidence, not as a polemicist chasing outrage.

> Rugyendo's PhD defence is, therefore, more than a personal victory. It is a civic lesson, a proof that words, work and will can still disturb complacency.

It is against this backdrop that the successful defence of a PhD thesis acquires its full meaning. The study - *From Print to Digital: Evolution, Adoption and Contribution of ePapers in the Ugandan Press* is not an ornamental credential.

It is the culmination of lived inquiry.

The research situates Ugandan media within global technological transitions, interrogating access, sustainability, revenue models, archival permanence and democratic reach.

It confronts uncomfortable truths, that digitalisation alone does not save journalism, that technology without ethics can hollow public discourse, and that sustainability requires institutional imagination.

Conducted under the supervision of Assoc Prof William Tayeebwa and Prof Adolf Mbaine, among Uganda's most respected scholars in media and communication, the doctorate was earned through the most unforgiving academic rituals: proposal defences, fieldwork, data analysis, revisions and public scrutiny.

In a country where titles are often accumulated without substance, this submission to peer review stands as an act of intellectual humility.

This scholarly turn is not an isolated episode. Through ResearchFinds News, which he founded and where he serves as founder and editor-in-chief, he has institutionalized research-driven journalism, policy briefs, report writing, academic symposia and research training. The platform has contributed to evidence-based political and social analysis in a public sphere often driven by rumor and intuition.

In 2016, he founded E2 Young Engineers Uganda, providing STEM education to children aged four to 15, an intervention aimed squarely at future competitiveness in a country where over 75% of the population is below 30.

As chairman of the Uganda Premier League (UPL) board, he operates at the intersection of sport, governance and commerce, navigating an industry whose revenues, fan engagement and regulatory challenges mirror broader questions of institutional management in Uganda.

So, this doctoral defence, which took place at Makerere University, is symbolically potent. Makerere is not merely an institution; it is an intellectual tradition that produced thinkers such as Ali Mazrui, Dani Nabudere, and Mahmood Mamdani, figures who insisted that ideas must interrogate power, not decorate it.

By defending a thesis on media transformation there, he inscribed himself, deliberately or not, into that lineage of engaged, contested public intellectualism.

In an age where slogans replace evidence and power often disdains study, this moment sends a quiet but powerful message; experience without reflection is not wisdom; authority without learning is dangerous; longevity without scholarship is decay.

It challenges a political class too often content to invoke nationalism while neglecting national knowledge systems. If one who has built media institutions can still return to the library and submit to peer review, what excuse remains for those entrusted with governing a republic?

This is why the moment inspires. Not because the life is flawless, but because it is demanding. It reminds Uganda that scholarship is not an enemy of power but its conscience; that thinking is patriotic; that loving one's country sometimes means interrogating it relentlessly. Rugyendo's PhD defence is, therefore, more than a personal victory. It is a civic lesson, a proof that words, work and will can still disturb complacency.

Long after the applause fades, the significance of this journey will endure quietly and stubbornly, especially for a nation that desperately needs more leaders who read, research, reflect and then act.

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