

I will fight for my independence, vows *New Age* editor

By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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The hugely ambitious plans for the [launch](#) next month of the government-friendly newspaper, [The New Age](#), has got media circles buzzing. Personally, I'm with Prof Anton Harber on this one, who wrote when rumours of an ANC-aligned newspaper [first started surfacing](#) that it would be a good thing for the party to have an outlet to explain itself and its policies.

Lord knows, the government's communications staff, which tends simply to clam up when facing difficult questions, could do with a bit of help.



The most interesting thing about this new enterprise is that the editor-in-chief, Vuyo Mvoko, is a respected journalist who has worked at *Business Day* and the SABC. He told Bizcommunity.com that while *The New Age* will be an experiment in positive news, he will also fight for his paper's independence.

Bizcommunity: *The only staff hire we know about at the moment is (former Miss South Africa) Claudia Henkel as the lifestyle and entertainment editor. I presume you guys are interviewing others now but aren't you cutting it a bit fine if you're launching in about a month? [It was announced after this interview that Business Day's political editor, Karima Brown, is to be the [deputy editor](#).]*

Vuyo Mvoko: Well, you could say that but it's not something that's bothering us that much as things stand. We believe that a lot of the preparations have been done... We are looking at state-of the-art technology that as we move towards launch will take care of a lot of the hassle.

Biz: *I'm not quite with you here as you still need highly skilled people to make the decisions.*



Vuyo Mvoko

Mvoko: Ja, we're going to have people who are going to go out there and do the stories... and our subbing system will be what you have in any other newsroom but a lot simpler. I'm afraid I'm not so deeply enmeshed in the technology and the jargon but I trust the people that have done all the preparatory work who say they've eliminated a lot of what you'd typically need if you start a newsroom.

That is being set up as we speak and what is left is for people to familiarise themselves with the system, which is not so different from what people know. In fact, it will be easier...

My sense of comfort comes from that [The Times of India](#) is a strategic equity partner [in the paper's publishers TNA Media] and the systems that we are employing are, in fact, very similar to theirs...

Not even two weeks ago, the publisher of *The Times of India* was here and he was taking us through their system and how it makes their lives easier... The real challenge will be in the calibre of the people we can attract to our newsroom...

Biz: *Can you tell me about anyone you've hired?*

Mvoko: No, but I'm sure I'll be able to in another week or two... But we are getting quality people to come on board so I am excited about it. Probably even more exciting is that for a lot of the people we didn't have to go out and convince but there are people who actually raised their hands and said they believe there is a space for the kind of thing that is being contemplated here and would like to be a part of it.

Biz: *That is interesting. Journalists have been very sniffy about the paper in general. I think it'll be a good thing for*

the government to get its view across and explain its policies in The New Age.

Mvoko: I'm one of those people who has always believed in the value of knowing the people you deal with. In other words, knowing what drives them and how they think - and being able to explain an idea before you criticise what they say...

Very often you find that we [the media and the government] talk past one other because almost instinctively we tend to say: "Oh, that's doublespeak; they don't know what they're talking about" and then we dish out the opinions. And sometimes it's a question of miscommunication or the person you're dealing may not be as eloquent as they should be...

Now one may argue that it's not our responsibility to try and spend time trying to understand what a government minister or a bureaucrat is trying to say but... it's easy for us as journalist to carp and criticise... You and I know that a lot of our colleagues' work leaves a lot to be desired. Some will write stuff that makes you cringe or they are dishing out opinions that have no basis...

For instance, someone [a journalist] told me last week that a [fellow] journalist walked into a newsroom and said that [ANC spokesman] Jackson Mthembu was busy recruiting people for the paper. That's the most bizarre thing that anyone has told me this year...

My point is that there is space in my view to do 1) positive news and 2) to get the public to know better and understand the people who are crucial to this democracy... I think also that a venture like this will have other benefits to our democracy. The very notion that we [as the media] know what our readers want and that good news doesn't sell may not be true or may not be entirely true...

We believe that something like *The New Age* will give us the opportunity to challenge these orthodoxies - just as the *Daily Sun* [tabloid] and *Son* did. For a very long time, those of us who worked at the serious newspapers frowned at that kind of journalism but look at how well they are doing. They have also found new readers, rather than simply taken readers away from other papers.

Biz: *OK, I get that you are trying something new with positive news and, in fact, I've heard many people say that they don't like to read the papers because they're so negative. But what will you do when a really big story breaks that is negative but is also very compelling, like Eugene Terre'Blanche's murder?*

Mvoko: It's not good news but that is what is happening. That's reality.

Biz: *So you guys would cover it?*

Mvoko: Of course... We're going to do stories about corruption and maladministration but it's about how you cover it and present it. So it won't be: "Oh, this country is going to the dogs" because there was a murder last night. [The Terre'Blanche story] was presented as if we were on the precipice of disaster. Now, come on...

[*The New Age* will take the viewpoint that] that in spite of what happens on a particular day, we can still wake up and look forward to a beautiful country and learn from the mistakes committed on the previous day.

Biz: *So if one of your reporters comes across corruption in government, will you pursue it?*

Mvoko: We would. There's nothing we are going to not do that journalists do. It's just how you handle it responsibly... I was at the SABC when the whole Zuma thing was starting with the spy allegations and the [Hefer Commission](#). I'm happy today that a lot of what I dismissed then - contemptuously if I may so - was borne out by the facts afterwards. You could see that some people were abusing power and cooking things up to sway public opinion in a particular direction. I could see how some of my colleagues were given documents and interviews in the hope that they would pursue a particular line...

I'm saying that it's stories like that that give us pause for thought about the sort of journalism we've been doing and say:

"Yes, we have not in certain instances done well for ourselves." And I'm also saying this with due respect for what journalists have done [in this country] to get us where we are [as a democracy]. I am mindful of that. I'm saying this with all the humility that it should come with.

The New Age is venturing into this kind of journalism, not because we feel we are better than other people but it's a conscience business decision that there is space for good news and for looking at the glass and saying it is half full and not half empty. We are just saying we would like to do that which others are not and we'll see how it goes.

Biz: You have said you want to have news from all the provinces beyond the major urban areas such as Joburg, Cape Town and Durban. But I can't see how good news is going to sell in the rural areas such as the Transkei in the Eastern Cape, where people are trapped in desperate poverty and they feel abandoned by the provincial and local governments. Clinics are not staffed properly and do not have the drugs they should; the schools are falling apart...

Mvoko: Look, you would find it hard to convince someone who feels hard done by lack of service delivery. Being at the receiving end of inefficiency or injustice or lack of service delivery hardly makes you receptive to a good-news story because your world is bad. But what we're saying is that rational thought should form part of any public discourse and give credit where it is due. That is not to say we're going to tell everybody that everything is hunky dory, thank you very much...

And it doesn't mean we're going to listen to every politician who says "we've done a lot". We will interrogate those facts and the public's experiences... But we want balance and we will think about the future, not just the here and now, not just tomorrow's scoop...

It's about being conscious of these things and about adding to the voices that are already here... At the end of the day, the readers will vote with their money and not buy this paper if they think it's rubbish.

Biz: So are you saying that you will protect the editorial independence of your paper?

Mvoko: Of course, that's what we are about.

Biz: This is why I'm curious about why you accepted this editorship? You might feel you're a pathfinder but lots of people see The New Age as a government mouthpiece. Aren't you worried how this position will reflect on you professionally?

Mvoko: I'm not worried. The reality is that each and every editor is under some pressure or the other on a consistent basis. There are people who want to influence you, not just your stories on a particular day but also the direction of your publication...

My point is that the whole holier-than-thou attitude (towards *The New Age*) is not on. The issue for the editor is how you deal with those pressures, how you make sure that at the end of the day you service your reader and speak to the values of your editorial direction. You will lose some and you will win some.

Biz: When you said earlier that the two main drivers here are 1) positive news and 2) to get the public to know better and understand the people who are crucial to this democracy - what crucial people did you mean? Government people?

Mvoko: No. I'm talking about the fact that South Africa is an ambitious nation - we want to be a great nation [hence our hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup]. Now who are the people who will take us there? What kind of people should be taking charge of this nation? And we [as a paper] would like to start that conversation - about who we are, what we need to get there.

Who are the people occupying positions of power and influence in every sphere of our lives whether its politics, business,

arts...? Let's talk to them and get to know them and their ideas.



Claudia Henkel

Biz: *Hiring Claudia Henkel was an unusual move. I know she's not your average beauty queen as she has a law degree but she's not an experienced journalist and yet she's one of your middle managers. Tell me about why you've hired you?*

Mvoko: Look, people play roles. A lot of people have been brought into media from different backgrounds such as Khanyi Dhlomo at *True Love* [magazine]. She had no journalism experience and she was brought in for a specific reason and she achieved what the publication wanted to achieve.

[Claudia's job] is about lifestyle; it's about being able to work in that space and with the people in that space and knowing what sells in that space.

Biz: *Like being a brand ambassador?*

Mvoko: Yes, there's quite a bit of that but Claudia is also keen on journalism and she has a passion for it. She may not be as experienced as many of us are but she's been at *Prestige* [magazine] and knows something about journalism. And she is also bringing something that a lot of journalists don't have.

There's space here for thinking out of the box and that's what this newspaper seeks to do. That's why we're going to mix youth with experience, mix traditional journalism with what others may not think as news that sells. It's about something new and going to go against convention some times.

For more:

- TNA Media: www.tnamedia.co.za
- Bizcommunity: [Is this the new age?](#) Ashraf Garda on interviewing Mvoko and The New Age's chief funder, Atul Gupta, on his Media@SAfm show
- Mail & Guardian Online: [Zuma 'meddled in mine buyout'](#) The M&G's May 2010 story on links between President Jacob Zuma's family and the Gupta family businesses
- Bizcommunity Search: [The New Age](#)
- Grubstreet.co.za: [The fascinating puzzle that is The New Age](#)
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ABOUT GILL MOODIE: @GRUBSTREETSA

Gill Moodie (@grubstreetSA) is a freelance journalist, media commentator and the publisher of Grubstreet (www.grubstreet.co.za). She worked in the print industry in South Africa for titles such as the *Sunday Times* and *Business Day*, and in the UK for Guinness Publishing, before striking out on her own. Email Gill at gill@grubstreet.co.za and follow her on Twitter at @grubstreetSA.

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