

Less of Abramjee's petitions, more 'Metrorail Diaries'-style campaigns, please



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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There was an interesting debate buzzing on Twitter last week, sparked by *Mail & Guardian* editor [Nic Dawes](#) disagreeing with a campaign by [Yusuf Abramjee](#), the redoubtable head of the National Press Club and head of news and current affairs at Primedia Broadcasting, to get journalists to sign a petition on the controversial Joburg [e-tolls](#).

"We need to investigate, report, provide a platform for debate, not constitute a new lobby," tweeted [Dawes](#), later adding (among other tweets) that "laws that attack us as journalists require us to respond as journalists. Doesn't mean we mobilise on all matters of controversy."

Stuck to his guns

[Abramjee](#) stuck to his guns, arguing that journalists are members of society, too, and there is nothing wrong with them campaigning on issues that concern the citizens of our country. If we campaign against the [Secrecy Bill](#), for instance, then why should we not campaign on other issues that do not directly concern journalism?

Abramjee, who is also head of the [Lead SA](#) initiative, is an energetic and passionate campaigner. There are some who are [uncomfortable](#) with how the Primedia radio stations, Talk Radio 702 and Cape Talk, cover his campaigns and also [question](#) for whom he speaks with his [National Press Club](#).

His let's-get-stuck-in-and-change-things attitude is infectious and let's not forget that South African journalism has a strong activist history. In the apartheid era, the journalists and editors of liberal newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail*, *Cape Times* and *Daily Dispatch* went far beyond the call of duty to fight the regime.

Shouldn't just sit on the fence

One can also argue that journalists shouldn't just sit on the fence and that newspapers need to campaign more for their communities of readers to remain relevant.

But I'm with Dawes on this issue as I believe there is a fine line between reporting objectively on controversial issues and becoming involved. You step over that line and you find it harder to defend your objectivity. The tolls issue is also a complex problem, not a straightforward case of holding the authorities accountable for service-delivery promises.

Like lawyers and priests, journalists work at an intersection of society, where we meet a wide range of people - from the

very rich to the very poor - and where people tell us things they wouldn't say in the average conversation. And they tell us things because they understand we are at that intersection - and that we don't take sides.

Recognise there are limits

Just as we must resist being wowed by powerful people, we must also recognise that there are limits to what we can do to help the powerless.

Even with civic journalism - which I have [written about before](#) - there is a fine balance between being proactively campaigning and not stepping beyond using the power of the pen.

You may set up public meetings for ordinary people to come to and voice their concerns about their neighbourhoods or cities or a particular issue but, essentially, the civic journalist is acting as a catalyst: to let the reader set the news agenda and to bring together the disempowered and the powerful so that there can be change.

Excellent example of civic journalism

Just last week, there was an excellent example of this kind of civic journalism going on in Cape Town, borne out of a partnership between the [Cape Argus](#) and [Eyewitness News](#) (which is part of Abramjee's Primedia). Called the [Metrorail Diaries](#), reporters from the two organisations did stories and [tweeted](#) about their experiences of commuting by train on the various lines to the city centre.

Inspired by a New York project that involved homeless people tweeting their experiences and thoughts, the campaign got both the Western Cape transport MEC and Metrorail regional manager to [commit to fixing](#) the problems that plague the aging fleet of commuter trains, such as delays and security.

It remains to be seen if these promises will be pursued and I think the *Argus* could have injected a bit more pizzazz into its campaign - this being a critical part of readers' lives and the future plans of the city. But it was informative, proactive journalism that tackled a hugely important part of Capetonian life and it leaves a crucial legacy - the [Metrorail Diaries Twitter handle](#) ([@MetrorailDiary](#) and [hashtag](#) on Twitter - that could well end up being a galvanising point as it has been picked up and is being used by commuters to report problems on the train lines.

We need more of this

Long may this conversation on this hashtag last - and well done to the *Argus* and Eyewitness News for starting the conversation. We need more of this kind of campaigning journalism - and less of Abramjee's petitions.

It makes me proud to read my *Argus* when I'm on the train.

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [Powerful journalism is easy peasy \(and here's how to do it\), September 2010](#)
- Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_journalism
- Rhodes Journalism Review: ["A civic engagement"](#), Rod Amner's analysis of the *Daily Dispatch's* civic journalism
- Rhodes Journalism Review: ["A Tale of Two Investigations"](#) by Rod Amner
- Rhodes New Media Lab blog: [Guy Berger on the SABC's "Social Reconstruction Initiative"](#)

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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