

# The New Age: not an agent of change



By Herman Manson: @marklives

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TNA Media has launched the long-awaited, and much-debated, newspaper [The New Age](#). Its front page, its second after the freebie Heritage Day special, reflects editor [Henry Jeffreys](#)' careful juggling act of batting away any criticism that the newspaper is obviously pro-ANC while also creating interest during a rather slow news cycle.



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One issue doesn't make a newspaper, or break it, and the paper has some obvious strengths, mostly in the form of Jeffreys, but also in its regional news, which still needs to build some strength but holds promise. Its retail price of R3.50 seems quite reasonable, and the fact that it publishes its page count next to the cover price, which suggests transparency to consumers.

On the downside is a dated, conservative look and feel; the lack of infographics, which is playing an increasingly important role in how newspapers present information to readers, and which Media24 is apparently investing quite heavily in; and its reliance, in both the Heritage Edition and this commercial launch edition, on government adspend.

## Seemed a little stale

If much of the news, including that of the three-page business section, seemed a little stale, I won't hold it against a launch issue. News will inevitably be forced to be fresher as stories filed in preparation for the first couple of editions run out. A deeper analysis reveals:

- The lead story of Johannes Rapau, who claims he is due a R500 000 for providing information that supposedly lead to the arrest and conviction of convicted mass rapist and murderer Moses Sithole, was a good one - except for a single point that seems to negate the basis for putting it on the front page of a national newspaper.

Rapau himself admitted that he had pursued his claim through a civil case but failed to corroborate his claim. Did Rapau produce the collaborative information for inspection by *The New Age* then? The story doesn't give any indication, but it looks unlikely. What exactly is the point of the story then and why is an apparently dubious claim worthy of this much attention?

- The Editorial Comment page applauded WikiLeaks, and took a firm stance against government regulation of the media, with Jeffreys declaring "...we are not The New Agent." The paper promises to support all levels of government, including provincial governments and municipalities - "provided they fulfil their mandate and live up to voters' trust."

There should be plenty of news material for the paper then, given service delivery protests in areas around the country, and it's a bargain that would serve *The New Age* well if it manages to uphold it, despite the perceived closeness between its financial backers and President Zuma's inner circle.

- Overall, opposition voices seem to be fairly represented in news stories.
  - A story on the meningitis outbreak at several Gauteng hospitals gives extensive space to opposition spokesperson to deplore the state of the hospitals in question, as does a story on the Gauteng department of Health losing more than a billion rand, following a dispute with a private contractor.
  - Cosatu received considerable coverage on its 25th birthday celebrations, including a two-page photo spread, a full page of opinion on the movement and a news story on page three. Cosatu is, of course, a member of the ruling alliance.
  - An opinion piece by Ebrahim-Khalil Hassen on a need for the union to return "back to basics" (and away from politics, one assumes) formed the primary opinion piece on Cosatu. It's a whisper from members gaining momentum, the author writes, but the advantages of this 'whisper' taking root seems quite clear for the ruling party. It offered an interesting alternative to increased media speculation that Cosatu and the alliance partners are drifting apart. "Back to basics" at Cosatu would certainly solve a couple of problems for the ANC.
- I do think national news over only two pages was a little wanting, and some items, such as COPE's congress and leadership election later this month, don't sit well on the regional pages (they were filed under Gauteng News but surely the goings on at COPE is of national interest).
- As promised, all nine provinces were represented in the newspaper, and regional news will serve as its strongest differentiator in a competitive market.

## Adspend

Government spend was decidedly obvious in the first real issue of the newspaper. You feel like telling the Free State government to fill some potholes rather than spend money on its ineffective "reduce speed" message over more than three quarters of a page. The ministry of Public Service and Administration was also represented, as was Limpopo's Department of Agriculture, the National Empowerment Fund and the Notheo District Municipality.

National commercial brands in the paper included Capitec (the till assistant assured her neighbour, while pointing at the Capitec ad on the front page of *The New Age*, that "this is the future of banking" - run and weep Big Four, run and weep), Absa, TopTV, CNA and Discom.

Retail advertising is the mainstay of the newspaper business and national retailers seem to have avoided *The New Age* while smaller regional chains supported the paper.

Ultimately, *The New Age* looks like just another newspaper apparently untouched by the information revolution and the new ways consumers are processing information. Who better to push boundaries than a newcomer? But *The New Age* is not a

change agent and the model hasn't evolved. It's more of the same. Only half full.

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