

Brave new world

by Justice Malala

The best of the stories came at the beginning of July. I was in Lagos, Nigeria, to meet members of our parent newspaper and to make final preparations for the launch of ThisDay in South Africa.

In sizzling hot weather, after a lazy lunch washed down with refreshing Star beer – the national fuel strike was on and I could not get any business done – I called a friend in Johannesburg from my hotel in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria.

“Is it true?” he asked, fear in his voice. I did not know what he was talking about and asked him to give me details.

“Well, the story in Johannesburg media circles is that you are over in Lagos to **pick up money in suitcases** and bring it over here.

“Apparently that is the only way you guys can get money into SA otherwise your newspaper will not get off the ground,” he replied, rather **sheepishly**.

I sighed. I had, after all, thought I had heard it all before. But this took the cake. Could any right-thinking person send the head of their organisation on a mission to illegally bring money into a country? Could any proprietor ask an editor to take part in such a **deplorable and illegal** act?

Since I accepted the job of founding editor of ThisDay and started working in February, we have had every manner of rumour and gossip circulated about us. We have been called names, have been derided as a Nigerian **money-laundering** operation and been promised that we would fold before we have even hit the streets. In Cape Town, where I went to interview prospective staff, my team and I were openly referred to as members of a 419 scam (the notorious Nigerian con scheme where victims hand over hundreds of thousands of rand). Ditto at the conference of the SA National Editors’ Forum, at dinner parties, on the Marketingweb site and at bars across the land.

The first question I was asked by one of the most senior members of our government when we went visiting recently, was: **“How clean is your money?”** All because the man who had the dream to build a transcontinental newspaper, the first African newspaper to straddle the continent, is Nigerian. I was at The Star when Tony O’Reilly bought Independent Newspapers in the early 1990s. I am still waiting for the xenophobic comments about that deal.

My proprietor, Nduka Obaigbena, is a charismatic, energetic dynamo of a man who started work on a newspaper in Nigeria as a cartoonist. **He rose through the ranks** until he worked for Time magazine in New York, dabbled with Newsweek for a while and rejoined Time in London, Paris and back on the continent as an advertising and marketing man.

Ink has always pumped through his veins. In the mid-1980s he started a news magazine called ThisWeek in Nigeria. In a market where all news magazines were printed in black and white, where there was no capability in the country’s presses to print in colour, he vowed that he would deliver to Nigeria a magazine that was of the standard of Time.

He hired journalists who wrote the stories in Nigeria, flew the laid-out pages to Kent, England, where the production work and printing was done, and flew the magazine back to Nigeria. **It was a revolution in Nigerian magazine publishing.** A magazine that was world-class, produced by a group of young men (Obaigbena was in his 20s) who wanted to deliver a product not yet seen in the market at that time.

The magazine folded when **repression** by the Babangida regime increased and the economic situation in Nigeria deteriorated to such an extent that profits made from the product – which were in Naira – could not keep up with sterling costs of printing in England. **But Obaigbena was undaunted.** In the mid-90s he started a weekly newspaper from a two-bedroomed flat in Lagos. It, too, was revolutionary at many levels. It was an independent voice in a market where most players were government-owned or cowed into submission by a succession of military dictatorships. It became the first newspaper to be printed in colour while the rest of the field was still in black and white. The paper was an unqualified success.

Obaigbena took it daily, and it proved to be unstoppable. He installed the best technology in the country – everything from Apple computers to the latest editorial systems from the United States and Europe. He bought an old warehouse building in Lagos’ dockside area and built his own presses on the premises.

Today that small newspaper is the most influential voice in Nigeria. It is the largest-circulation, serious newspaper in the country. It is known for the excellence of its journalism, the bravery of its reporters and editors, and the independence and authoritativeness of its columnists. It has won the country’s newspaper of the year award three times in a row from the year of its inception, and its editors and reporters dominate journalism awards ceremonies every year. It is a perfect example for all of us on this continent of how a **brave and exciting** press can contribute significantly to the building of a country. Obaigbena has himself been detained by Babangida and had to flee Sani Abacha’s soldiers. He fled to London and was exiled there until Abacha died and his regime crumbled.

I got the call to speak to ThisDay in November last year. I came to Johannesburg on the 22nd of that month and had extensive talks with Obaigbena and several other members of our management team. I knew then that there was absolutely no question of my turning down an opportunity to work for ThisDay. Here was an African, full of dreams and passion and energy, offering me a dream. **He was unequivocal:** “I am here to build a newspaper. It will be authoritative, it will be daily, it will be strong on politics, business and society. Its coverage of Africa will be comprehensive. It will be a partner to our newspaper in Nigeria, and yet it will be uniquely South African,” he said.

I have always wanted to start a newspaper. I should, rightly, be inspired by Sol Plaatje and John Tengo Jabavu, African men who started newspapers in our distant past. But I am a child of the 1980s, and it is Irwin Manoim and Anton Harber who got my groove going when they launched the Weekly Mail and later, the Daily Mail. Post-1994, nothing as exciting as this has happened in SA newspapers. **I threw my hat in,** and I have not regretted a single moment since. We are starting a newspaper for a maturing, democratic South Africa that embraces the African continent and the world. Our readers are young and old alike who are enthusiastic about the future of this country and yet have not lost their critical faculties. They are engaged with the issues that confront us: they want the facts on HIV/Aids before they become activists, they are engaged with the unravelling of Zimbabwe, they read Tolstoy and confront Chomsky, they make love and read Neruda in the nude, they own big cars and Beetles. They are the WaBenzi and know

The Gate Keeper's job is to keep out the riff-raff. He runs a tight gate: if it's not new – "Forget it!", doesn't have promixity – "Not coming through my gate!", isn't unusual – "Whoa!", isn't bleeding – "Who cares?", won't make good visuals – "Push off", it's a follow-up – "Been there, done that". He keeps strict hours for the gate and will only let you through if you come with Adva Tizing.

they will come under the firing line from us if they dare forget that this country is built on **the promise of a better life for all.** They share one thing above all else: they are **damn intelligent** and know that there is no daily publication in South Africa today that captures the national debate. That is why they will come to the pages of ThisDay **to duel and laugh** and look at their contemporaries. They know that ours is a country of many shades and hues and intricacies: **they are tired of predictable reporting and writing.**

I could dwell on what we are going to do for journalism in this country, but I will not. Let me count, instead, the ways in which we have improved journalism in South Africa since the announcement that we would be launching a new newspaper.

The major media houses in this country have – except perhaps for Johnnic – paid journalists atrocious salaries. Many highly talented writers and editors have found themselves **with no option but to leave** reporting and join advertising agencies and the plethora of communications companies that have mushroomed in the past 10 years.

But since we came in and offered journalists decent salaries – as opposed to exorbitant, as claimed by our competitors – many journalists have had their salaries increased. **Anywhere in the world, show me a well-paid journalist and I will show you a journalist who displays initiative, works hard and delivers excellent copy.**

Is paying journalists decent salaries unsustainable in SA's media environment? This is what our competitors are saying. I beg to differ, and have one strong example: Johnnic pays most of its journalists reasonably well, and it continues to power ahead. Since we said we are coming out, they have increased their salaries substantially. **And look at their bottom line – glowing as ever.**

We will be a national newspaper, printed in



Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and probably one other centre to begin with. We have made no secret of the fact that we believe South Africa is a country that has for long wanted a daily newspaper that speaks with one voice, a newspaper that transcends the divides that apartheid sought to make us believe existed among us. A few months into 2003, Business Day announced that they would begin printing in Durban. I say good luck to them, and if they are truly a national newspaper **then all the better for all thinking South Africans.** Now, the public will have two national dailies.

We have made no bones about the fact that we expect our journalism to be of the highest quality and standards possible. Our journalists have received training from some of the best writers and trainers in this country and abroad, **and more training will take place.**

Now look at the rest of the newspapers in this country. Independent Newspapers has held weekend bosberaads and introduced various new elements to their titles. In KwaZulu-Natal The Independent on Saturday has various new features and so has The Mercury. The Cape papers are working **frantically to jazz themselves up.**

In Gauteng, The Star and Pretoria News are refining their positioning and adding new elements which they hope will secure their readership.

A rash of inspiration among the editors of Independent titles? No. It is the kind of preparation that we saw in the old Argus when Harber and Manoim were about to launch the Daily Mail.

Business Day has launched at least four new sections in the past few months. It has added motoring, small and medium enterprises, books, law and exporting to its repertoire. **Who wins when all this happens? It is you, dear reader.** Do the current crop of newspaper owners love you so much that they would have added all these new features anyway? I wouldn't put any money on it.

One last thing. We have taken a long time to launch. Many have called us SomeDay and all sorts of other names in a bid to force us to launch when we are patently not ready. So. When are we launching? As Obaigbena says: "Does George W. Bush tell Iraq when he is going to attack?"

We make no excuses for not having launched in the past months. Our management and journalists are sure that we will launch this newspaper. Of that there is no doubt.

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