

VANUATU DAILY POST



THE NEWS YOU TRUST

only 100vt

DAILYPOST.VU



5000th edition

Celebrating a pioneer of media freedom

Marc Neil-Jones' newspaper celebrates a historic milestone. We need to remember how it came about.

5000th edition

2+ DECADES DEFENDING MEDIA FREEDOM



"I have been lucky," said Marc Neil-Jones in his valedictory speech when he retired at the end of 2015. "I came to Vanuatu only 4 years after cyclone Uma had destroyed the place. I came here in 1989 with \$8000 and one of those small early Macintosh computers and the first Apple laser printer."

Out of that Mac came an institution that has effectively defined Vanuatu's region-leading reputation for media freedom.

Since he arrived in Vanuatu from Papua New Guinea 26 years ago, Marc's swashbuckling approach to life and his fearless dedication to the truth—to say nothing of his apparently immortal mullet—have created a legend almost bigger than a man can be. We celebrate his life and his achievements today.

If you run a Google search for 'Marc Neil-Jones', the very first image to appear is of a rather punch-drunk man with a bloody nose and a split lip. Marc has gone—literally and metaphorically—*toe-to-toe* with countless powerful figures in his time. And although his health has suffered of late, he has emerged the victor in every confrontation.

He has been deported, imprisoned, beaten... and threatened with lawsuits so often that he reacts to each new lawyer's letter with nothing more than a quiet smile, like someone hearing news of an old friend.

Some claim that he's drunk kava with more prime ministers than any other man. In his time away from the office his rallery and *joie-de-vivre* left many young women breathless and, often enough, scandalised.

But he brought that same passion and intensity to his work. Without his unique mix of affability and panache, it's doubtful that the media in Vanuatu would have evolved as it has.

Marc's legacy runs deeper than many people appreciate.

Back in 1993, Marc Neil-Jones persuaded then-Prime Minister Maxime Carlot Korman to allow him to open a proper newspaper, the first of its kind in Vanuatu. Until then, only a government rag existed, and its coverage of politics and current events was... staid, to say the least. It was Marc's taste for scandal and imbroglia that led him into the newspaper business, but it was his deeply-held sense of decency and desire for fairness that created the newspaper you're reading today.

In over two decades of partnership with local businessman Gene Wong, Marc's brainchild has moved from strength to strength. Even in the wake of cyclone Pam's devastation and the subsequent economic downturn, the Daily Post and Buzz FM remain profitable.

It is impossible to measure the social wealth that this man has helped create. Without a newspaper of record, one could argue that Vanuatu's path over the years would have been a different one.

At the height of tension during the 2015 criminal bribery trials, a Solomon Islands policeman turned to a Ni Vanuatu colleague and said, 'Mate, if this were Honiara, half the town would be on fire by now.'

But this is Port Vila, not Honiara; and not to put too fine a point on it, if people here have learned to love ethics, fairness and the rule of law, they learned most of it in the pages of the Daily Post.

Marc Neil-Jones has faced increasing health challenges in recent years, and at the end of 2015, he formally announced his retirement. He is a pioneer, a champion of media freedom and a member of a truly elite—and far too small—club of fearless defenders of the truth in the Pacific islands.





National Bank
Vanuatu's Own Bank
www.nbv.vu

BACK TO SCHOOL LOAN

FAST LOAN APPROVAL!
COMPETITIVE INTEREST RATES!
FLEXIBLE REPAYMENT TERMS!

Talk to us today on 22201



The future of media freedom

Media freedom is everyone's freedom. We can't take it for granted.

My education in the challenges of reporting the news began in a hurry. I got my first threatening lawyer's letter less than half an hour after sitting down at my desk. The next day, I found myself at the receiving end of an angry harangue from someone whose name had just appeared on our front page. He accused me of sensationalising the news just to sell papers.

It's a common insult, and one that many journalists learn to wear like a badge of honour. You simply can't report the news responsibly without upsetting people. If you're going to speak truth to power, if you're going to confront society's challenges, if you're simply going to tell it as it is... you've got to be willing to make people uncomfortable.

Back in May last year, I gave a talk on Media Freedom Day. I described a news reporter as "the honest friend who tells you 'yeah, your butt does look big in that.' He's the friend who stands between you and that bully and says, 'You don't have the right to speak to her like that!' And then turns to you and says, 'And neither do you.'"

"The reporter is the friend that

tells you what your other friends are saying about you. Whether you want to hear it or not.

"The reporter is the friend who tells you what you did wrong, and who still visits you in jail. They don't hate you when you don't agree; they don't like you just because you do."

I ended with a realisation:

"It never struck me until I started working at a newspaper just how it felt for people to see their name in the headline. Good news or bad, it's a shock."

Good news or bad. It's not easy being the centre of attention. The lesson really landed when friends and colleagues of mine were faced with misfortune, and I found our relationship tested by my duty to put my personal feelings aside and respect the public's right to know.

If it hadn't been for the example set by the Daily Post over the years, I would have fewer friends today than when I started. Happily, the opposite is true. Thanks to the trailblazing work of Marc Neil-Jones and the dozens of fearless journalists whose blood, sweat and tears

have graced these pages, every fair-minded, reasonable person in this country accepts that the news should challenge us.

As long as it's fair, that is. This is the challenge that keeps us awake at night, the thing that drives us to re-litigate—again and again—the means by which we prepared our stories, how we sourced them, who we talked to, what we can fairly say.

We don't always get it right. That's a statistical impossibility. And reporting in Vanuatu, a notoriously information-starved environment, the challenges are often immense.

At the end of March last year, I wrote, "Access to information is critical to a healthy society, and when it works, its benefits are crystal-clear."

And later in the same piece: "Vanuatu has never lacked for communication, in every kitchen, in every bar and nakamal, in the cess of social media, in the press and on the airwaves. Some say there's too much of it. I don't; I just think it's often ill-informed."

"Wouldn't it be nice, though, if

we could finally talk about what we actually know?"

Getting the facts straight is a challenge for everyone here in Vanuatu. It makes decision-making difficult, and our understanding is often driven as much by instinct and bitter experience than actual data.

The challenge is even greater in the media. If we are to maintain the trust of our reading audience, especially in the face of a cynical global campaign to discredit the news and its purveyors, we have to work harder than anyone else. We have to scrupulously cleave to the Media Code of Conduct. We have to bend over backwards to ensure that our stories are fair, that they are as complete as they can reasonably be, and—most importantly of all—we have to be guided by the facts.

The current tidal wave of cynical detachment from events is being driven by unprincipled people in positions of power—and in the media itself. It's a matter of great shame to me that some of my colleagues would be willing to allow pettiness and partisan affiliation to define their portrayal of the facts.

Shortly after starting work at the Daily Post, I tried to draw a distinction between scepticism, the stock in trade of any self-respecting journalist, and cynicism: "a cynic thinks he knows all the answers already, and often has to be dragged kicking and screaming toward the truth."

"A sceptic, on the other hand, doesn't quite trust anything to be true. Not even her own knowledge. A sceptical approach to social media is nothing less than a survival tool. Above all, it's the only way to be fair about things."

"A sceptic doesn't speak beyond her own knowledge. A famous novel by Robert Heinlein has a character whose job it is to be a Fair Witness. Asked what colour the house in front of her was, she replied, 'It's white on this side.'"

"That is the kind of healthy scepticism that we should be applying to every information source. We should question, and we should not take the answers on faith. We should fairly evaluate both good and bad."

"It's neither useful nor healthy

always to assume the worst, or to trust anything based only on someone's say-so. Evidence matters, no matter where it points."

It gives me comfort, therefore, to note how the Vanuatu public's engagement with facts, and its abiding sense of human decency is successfully holding back the tide of cynicism, character assassination and lying innuendo that has washed over more 'developed' countries.

At the end of last year, I noted that "We are by nature a gossipy, jealous, petty and spiteful species. It's just how our herd mentality expresses itself. We are also empathic and quick to unite in the face of a threat."

"Media organisations know this. Some governments and politicians know this. And whether motivated by greed or lust for power, they are willing to leverage that knowledge to the fullest extent."

"In the right hands, sensational fictionalising gives us The Grapes of Wrath and It's a Wonderful Life. It gives us Game of Thrones as an allegory of a society breaking down into

anarchy. In the wrong hands, it gives us American cable news, the Fiji Sun, PNG's Post-Courier and an actual descent into anarchy."

"Vanuatu, on the other (other) hand, has somehow managed to maintain a balance between emotion and respect for human dignity. In spite of numerous loud complaints—and a few vividly noticeable exceptions—we manage to maintain a relatively decent sense of decorum in our discussion groups. And we do it in the face of concerted efforts to rile people up."

"The Daily Post—and I personally—have been defamed in social media. The good name of our newspaper has been tarnished by people ranging from former Prime Ministers to basement dwelling nobodies. That just comes with the territory. We deserve to be held to a higher standard, and when—not if—we get something wrong, it has to be noted loudly and visibly. It's a basic responsibility for those who report the news."

"And we're happy to see that Vanuatu's online community is showing the same reputation. While scurrilous accusations and

petty, ill-informed comments are still rife, what matters is how they're received. Nearly every time an accusation is made, the poster is challenged either to provide proof or to remove their post. Fake news is outed almost as quickly as it appears."

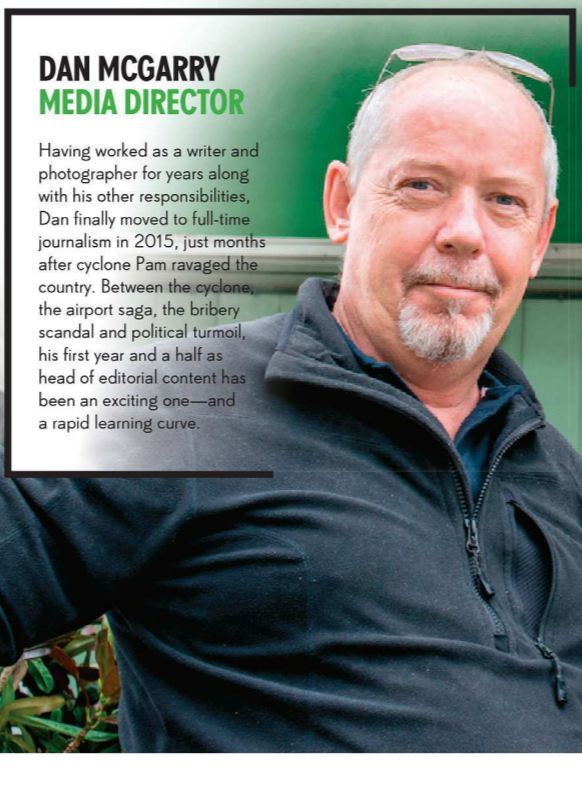
The state of the media in Vanuatu is healthy. And its health can be directly attributed to the particular amalgam of fearless confrontation and respect for human dignity that has been the hallmark of the Daily Post since its first print run.

We have a great deal still do to. Media freedom and healthy public discourse are organic things. They are landscape, not architecture. They need to be tended, respected and protected from erosion over time.

It gives me immense pleasure and pride to say: So far, so good.

With a generous application of blood, toil, sweat and tears, the next 5000 issues will support and sustain a reputable, respectful and fearless media just as well as the first 5000 have.

It's an honour to be part of this team.



DAN MCGARRY
MEDIA DIRECTOR

Having worked as a writer and photographer for years along with his other responsibilities, Dan finally moved to full-time journalism in 2015, just months after cyclone Pam ravaged the country. Between the cyclone, the airport saga, the bribery scandal and political turmoil, his first year and a half as head of editorial content has been an exciting one—and a rapid learning curve.

ROYSON WILLIE
EDITOR

Editor since 2010 and employed with the Daily Post for long before, Mr Willie has overseen the Daily Post through a turbulent and important part of its history. He has been a lifelong defender of media freedom, and has put himself in harm's way more than once.