

EXCLUSIVE: Verashni Pillay new M&G Editor-in-Chief



By Louise Marsland

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The *Mail & Guardian* has appointed seasoned journalist, editor and digital strategist Verashni Pillay as its new Editor-in-Chief to reinvigorate the brand and steer the publication "back to its roots", following a raft of [retrenchments, recent cutbacks and falling circulation](#)...



Verashni Pillay

It is hoped that Pillay will be able to capitalise on the increasing opportunities in the digital space to reposition the brand for the future with improved circulation and revenues; as well as a new "boldness of character".

The *Mail & Guardian* blamed its recent woes on the rapid migration of audience to its digital platforms without the concomitant advertising support or subscription income, amid a dip in overall circulation and shrinking advertising revenue.

Outlining her new role, Pillay says her first priority will be to create stability and engage with staff members.

"There have been a lot of changes in the newsroom and I know there will be some concerns that need to be addressed. I have good relationships with everyone in the newsroom so I am looking forward to that process, as there is a strong sense of ownership among the editorial staff and they're brilliant people with great ideas. But in terms of the first project I will embark upon, it will be a re-positioning and organising of the *M&G's* comment and analysis products across all platforms."

Pillay says that the *Mail & Guardian* is a special place and has an incredibly important role to play in South Africa's democracy.

"I know the place inside out, in many ways, having worked with so many departments and we have some very smart people working there and a spirit that sort of endures within the building that makes this publication what it is. As for stepping into a more senior role as a media leader, I'm more than ready for it. I have some great mentors helping me, and good relationships within the industry and I feel ready and energetic for the tasks and challenges ahead.

"My real passion is media management and I particularly enjoy putting together the right teams and processes in place to enable great journalism."

She says that the most important thing is to be honest and sincere about the challenges and work as a collective to solve issues. "I don't want to deny that things have been difficult, but I do want to see the challenges as an opportunity to really re-create the *M&G* in some ways. So I want to take on board all the criticism and use it to drive us forward and again start creating the beautiful and game-changing journalism the *M&G* has always been known for, but in more innovative ways."

M&G chief executive Hoosain Karjieker said he was looking forward to the paper asserting a new identity with Pillay at the helm. "Verashni has a talent for energising a team and creating a strong editorial vision."

Pillay joined the *Mail & Guardian* in 2009 from the Media24 stable where she worked on the digital journalism side, becoming associate editor at the *M&G* in 2013 and covering political and current affairs for the newspaper. At the *Mail & Guardian*, she overhauled the online editorial division. She also conceptualised and launched new products such as 'Voices of Africa' blogs, Woman Leader, and was co-leader on the award-winning Nelson Mandela tribute site.

Over the past year, she launched a social media training company, Social Weavers, working with leading print and broadcast brands in digital journalism, social media and convergence. Pillay is also a recipient of the *CNN African Journalism Award*, a *Standard Bank Sikuvile Award* and an Open Society Foundation journalism fellowship. She has worked closely with and been mentored by previous editors at the *M&G*, including Nic Dawes, Chris Roper, Angela Quintal and Moshoeshoe Monare.

According to the *M&G* press release, Pillay's "energy, digital knowledge and passion for media management and good journalism... her institutional knowledge of its newsroom" make her the best candidate for the role of editor as, she understands the publication's people and the current challenges and opportunities facing the publication.

Pillay herself sees her greatest challenge as editor, in creating quality journalism for a more demanding platform audience with increasingly stretched resources; as well as continued pressure placed on media freedoms.

"The owners and management of the *M&G* understand that they absolutely have to respect that boundary and I along with the rest of the team will jealously guard our independence."

Philip de Wet will support Pillay as acting deputy editor. He joined the *M&G* in 2012 from the *Daily Maverick* where he was deputy editor. Both will take up their new positions on 19 October 2015. The *M&G*'s Shaun de Waal will act as caretaker editor until then.

Quality journalism

Pillay wants to ignite the ethos that the *Mail & Guardian* was always known for. "Since its incarnation as the *Weekly Mail*, this publication has been known for its hard-hitting investigative journalism and compelling and sometimes audacious storytelling. I believe we need to rekindle that boldness and character, while advancing the complex debates at the centre of our national conversation - which often begin on social media and beg for deeper engagement in the pages of our national titles."

Former *M&G* editor Angela Quintal, who resigned in August this year, said yesterday that Pillay and her new editorial management team were perfectly placed to drive the *M&G*'s renaissance.

"The *Mail & Guardian* survived a seismic period that began last year. It included tough economic conditions leading, among other things, to budget cuts, frozen posts and cash-flow challenges. It eventually culminated in last month's painful retrenchment process. The loss of the editor-in-chief, editor and deputy editor, within three months of each other, added to the perceptions of instability, but the *Mail & Guardian* is far bigger than any individual.

"It will continue to play a critical role in South African journalism, as well as in nurturing and strengthening our democracy. As the new editor-in-chief, Verashni has the talent and drive to renew, heal and rebuild and to reach out to contributors and others who have shared the pain of the last few tumultuous months," Quintal told Bizcommunity.com.

Given the fairly hostile environment for independent journalism in South Africa, Pillay says there are always new opportunities in a time of crisis. "There is a strong understanding that independent media and particularly investigative journalism is important and it is gratifying to see the support we still have out there.

"My strategy will be to gather a strong team together to create great journalism while maintaining a healthy interest in the business side of things as that's what really needs to ensure our survival. We have to be able to sustain the work that we need to do. There are several different models out there to do so: Bhekisisa, the *Mail & Guardian*'s health journalism centre, which consistently wins awards under its editor Mia Malan, has just received a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which will enable it to double its staff complement next year and expand its activities into Africa. That's one model that is already working well and can continue to play expand on that.

She goes on: "Monetising our content has proven to be trickier and the negative reaction to the paywall that was recently put on the *M&G* website speaks to that. I have several ideas of how we can shore up our revenues in a way that takes our readers along with us and does not alienate them. I am working on some ideas of how to create a better value proposition for readers with our subscription products."

As Pillay emphasises: "To be brave and bold one needs a very robust vision of who we are and what we're trying to do, and part of my process would be re-visiting those questions so that we're clear on our vision across departments within the organisation."

Pillay's appointment was also announced on the *M&G* website with a stirring [video](#).

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