

We're 70% there and poised to grow, says iMaverick's Branko Brkic



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

6 Dec 2011

It's early days for the pathfinding [iMaverick](#), the country's first-ever iPad-only daily newspaper [launched](#) by [Daily Maverick](#) founder [Branko Brkic](#) in October 2011 (though a pdf version was launched in August).



Branko Brkic

After a soft launch, all the media luvvies have been asking how it's doing and, although they're still mum on the subscription numbers (you get a free iPad with your subscription), Maverick CEO [Styli Charalambous](#) told Bizcommunity that he's working on a couple of corporate deals that could up these figures in a big way - he hopes to announce them early next year.

In the meantime, maverick editor Brkic tells Biz what he and his team have learned in the past few months, what's to come and why he takes criticism that iMaverick might be too long as a compliment.

■ So are you still refining the app?

Branko Brkic: Look, it's probably at around 70% of what I want. I need to refine it more. The whole thing is that you learn so much while you do it. The learning curve for me and the entire team was incredible and there's no school that can prepare you for it. We're literally breaking new ground here. It's basically a daily magazine because the whole idea is to create a *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine every day so it's been very interesting.

We've learned a lot and we're learning still and I don't think we're going to stop learning. So we're still not there but we're going in the right direction.

■ What is the key thing you guys have learned?

Brkic: Well, it's a massive production challenge. To deliver a well-designed, pertinent read every day that looks stunning and is a pleasure to read is a big task. You can't do with a team made out of 'single-craft' experts, if I can call it that.

You've got to have people who can [do] three or four jobs at the same time. So you've got people who write stories but immediately they're aware of what the story's going to look like, where it's going to be and what's it going to be. And it's the same with the sub-editors and the designers - the same thing with me. You can't afford to have different layers of management. You just have to do so many different things at the same time.

■ Hectic! Aren't you guys exhausted?

Brkic: Yeah. We are but what's your point? [laughing]

■ *Well, just getting out a daily newspaper is an incredible feat. The average daily newspaper contains 30 000 words written by the journalists, which is the same length as the average novel - but this is being done every single day. It's a finely tuned production system that for most papers has been developed over decades. You guys are new to this and have far less staff than most daily newspaper, so what you're doing is really amazing.*

Brkic: Yes. And normally newspapers are not really designing. They're doing layout.

■ For sure. How many editorial people have you got?

Brkic: Round about 20 people.

■ *That's quite small. Now you say you're about 70% where you want to be with iMaverick, so what are you still wanting to work on - more content or the refining the presentation?*

Brkic: We need to refine content and add much more coverage in different sections, much more reportage. We know what we want but our budgets are going to grow in the next year and then we'll add quite a few things that we're not doing at the moment. When we can afford to have more people, then we can afford to be more refined. It's literally an issue of budgets but they should be shooting up significantly in the next few months.

There are things we want to do that we don't do at the moment. We don't do humour. We want to do quite a bit more of direct reportage - you know, people going into communities and talking to people and writing about them. At the moment we can't afford to do it - we just don't have enough people - and that's something we want to invest a significant amount of money in. How do you present the world and South Africa today if you don't go into the streets and talk to people?

■ ***This is what [Daily Maverick deputy editor] Phillip de Wet's been doing with [covering service delivery marches](#). He's doing great stuff - I think it's a real USP for you guys.****

Brkic: Ja. His reportage is absolutely brilliant. It's something we committed to actually - his series of covering protests in Joburg - and Phillip covered them unbelievably well. What we wanted to do there was show the power of the medium. Because, for us, to do a 20-page spread of Malema's guys trashing downtown Joburg or on the residents of [Schubart Park](#), the iPad is made for it. You don't have to worry about space and pictures are used in full, glorious colour. In the next week or so we're going to publish a special edition of iMaverick: a complication of Phillip's reportage.



■ ***Do you ever think of doing less of the international stuff and more local stuff, which is what you guys are best at - and I mean the kind of stuff Phillip is doing?***

Brkic: Look, some of our international writers - like [the US-based] Brooks Spector - are just phenomenal. And remember, he's looking at things from a South African angle. In a normal organisation, you probably would have been right but in our case we've got a couple of really high-end individuals who actually understand the international situation really well. I mean, Richard Poplak and Brooks really understand what's going on in the world.

Some of our stories have been republished [internationally]. When Steve Jobs died, I found out at 2am and by 6am we had the [story](#) on Daily Maverick and iMaverick written by Richard Poplak. And the next day in [the US-based] [Christian Science Monitor](#), they [quoted that story](#) as the top story on Steve Jobs...

■ ***And what kind of feedback are you getting from readers and users?***

Brkic: Ja. We're getting feedback and the only negative [one was from you](#). [laughing]

■ ***OK. Mine was very couched though as I said it wasn't really fair to judge iMaverick by the [earlier] pdf version [before the iPad app was ready].***

Brkic: Actually, I'd love to debate this with you. I thought your issue that iMaverick was too big - I took it as a compliment and I tell you why. When you read a newspaper, how many stories do you read in it: one, two, three?

■ ***Yep. Definitely not more in a daily newspaper.***

Brkic: With our stories, the urge [for you as reviewer] was to read each and every story but you didn't have enough time. I prefer it my way. When you open a newspaper, you don't want to read the whole thing. You're going to browse and choose what you going to read. We're a newspaper essentially - or more of a *Time* magazine. You don't read every story in *Time* magazine but you enjoy looking at all the pictures and you're getting an idea of what the story is about. I'd love it if every reader read every story but, you know, I'm very happy that people feel they don't have enough time to read it all [in iMaverick] because there are so many good stories there.

■ ***OK, I'm with you and the difference with the tablet [compared to the early pdf version] is that there is a drop-down menu and you hop around - whereas you couldn't do that with the pdf.***

Brkic: You just can't compare the beauty of it - just even the full-page picture on the cover. I must admit every time I download an issue on the iPad, I feel giddy... you can't actually experience [what an iPad has to offer] until you have it in your hands. It's very special.

■ **And are we going to see more interactivity with iMaverick - more use of the technology?**

Brkic: Ja, of course. We're working on a new version of the app and that will be up in the next week or so. It will be much easier to navigate and much easier to use - you'll see... You want to avoid loading on too many gizmos. You don't want it too big or too unwieldy. It's really trial and error. But remember, Gill, that we are literally breaking new ground so it's tremendously exciting but it's really heavy work.

■ **Some people have wondered if iMaverick is too ambitious.**

Brkic: Well, different people have different opinions and I guess that there are some people in the media that are waiting for this to fail - but this is their right. My job is to produce a beautiful read. The thing with Maverick is that, when we launched, people didn't know they needed it. And my stance with iMaverick is that people don't know they need it until they see it. You tell me, you're the reader.

■ **Mmm, I dig it. My problem is we share an iPad at home. I think I'll like it even more when I have my own iPad. iMaverick is better than any of three daily newspapers that have been coming over my wall every day. But is iMaverick different enough from what's going out for free on the [online] Daily Maverick? [The most recent stats for Daily Maverick show that it is getting around 140 000 unique visitors per month and time spent on site is 3:52.]**

Brkic: It's three or four times bigger. There's a massive difference in size. It's basically M-Net open time versus M-Net... We'll be adding more and more to iMaverick and we're going to do a weekly lifestyle magazine on Fridays. Once you've established your platform, then you have it.

■ **OK, nice. What are you most pleased with, Branko?**

Brkic: What am I most pleased with? Difficult question. I'm most pleased with the way it feels. You tell me: is the reading of a daily newspaper a pleasure or a grudge? Do you get my point? One of my main things in life is that there is nothing wrong with enjoying your daily read. People's lives are tough and, if I can produce something which feels good and looks great and offer great editorial, I'm happy because I added to their lives.

I think iMaverick really feels great once you have it in your hands and you browse it. It feels really substantial. It's not an easy thing to create something out of nothing. To go from zero to one is terrible exciting. iMaverick didn't exist a couple of months ago. Now it exists and people like it and enjoy it. For me that's terribly exciting, you know; it's proof that we're alive.

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [iMaverick is too long: NewsNow is for chicks](#), by Gill Moodie, September 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Is Maverick op die regte iPad?](#) by Chris Moerdyk, June 2011
- [Is Branko bonkers or brilliant? SA's first daily iPad 'paper' proposition examined](#) by Andrew Trench, June 2011
- Bizcommunity: [More sense than rands: SA online journ comes into own](#) by Gill Moodie, July 2010

*On Wednesday morning, 7 December 2011, it was announced that Phillip de Wet, co-founder of the Daily Maverick and iMaverick, has [parted ways with the company](#) in order to take a well-deserved break. He will probably still do freelance or project work for the two titles in the New Year.

Updated at 10.27am on 7 December 2011.

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