

Digital disruption

SOME INSTAGRAMS



SIGN - KRUGERSDORP: from the series Life under Democracy - Dale Yudelman

By Anthea Garman

I'm going to shamelessly pinch someone else's language to think about the changes and challenges of this media moment we are living through and take the theme for the Mennel Media Exchange (MMX14), organised by Laurie Bley of Duke University and Patrick Conroy of eNCA and held in Johannesburg in July.

"Digital disruption" doesn't fall into the neat pessimism or optimism so emblematic of our times but does say forcefully that we are all on uncertain ground and need to reconfigure our ways of doing and being in media making, media managing and in education.

this year has been an interesting one for me, I returned from academic leave in which I concentrated on research to come back to teaching and have been really lucky in being exposed to a number of people who've shifted my thinking about how to approach the rapidly oncoming future. So some shapshots (or instagrams) of this year so far:

No longer constrained by ink, paper, time

Let's start with Bill Adair, a contributing Editor for Politifact (<http://www.politifact.com/>) who was the keynote speaker at the Mennel Media Exchange (see <http://menellmediaexchange.com/>). Politifact is an interesting reinvention of the extreme attention to factual detail which giant computerised power makes possible. This makes verification into a new concentrated form of journalism which is not just a significant tool for accountability but also has its humorous and satirical possibilities (see the rating "pants on fire" attributed to those who manipulate information with the highest degree of subterfuge and/or stupidity).

Adair started by reeling off those stats which plunge us all into deep gloom because the financial model that upheld print is collapsing and the new configuration that will capture digital audiences has not yet been worked out. But then he took a turn and focused on the "upside of disruption" by saying "this is a transformational moment in human communication" and that it comes "via the phones in our pockets".

"This is a transformation on the level of the Gutenberg Press. We are no longer constrained by ink, paper and time. The best is available to everyone and these new devices and formats allow us to develop new forms of journalism. So let's reinvent journalism."

Adair used the example of the Apple Macintosh "pirates" who were set aside from others in the company and from the usual routines and the "culture of the ordinary" to reinvent their computer business. His advice to managers and owners was to "make sure you're solving a problem people really have" and to "go narrow, go deep: do one thing really well".

Also at MMX14 was *Business Day* editor Songezo Zibi who took a more considered approach. He spoke about how car manufacturers have to think of a product that fits the now but will last for the life of a vehicle. The product must respond to present and future needs. He sees this consideration as really important to take into account for



NELSON MANDELA'S PRISON CELL - ROBBERN ISLAND: from the series Life under Democracy - Dale Yudelman

media. He also reminded everyone: "we are not the drivers of the change" and that the internet companies, the phone companies and the computers are the drivers. He said the important principle was to have a "transformatory attitude".

Adrian Basson, editor of *Beeld*, takes a gung ho approach - "never let a good crisis go to waste". He had some strong points to make:

1. Take down the Chinese wall (between editorial and advertising) and get more creative about what to offer advertisers.
2. Go digital first: "it's about the deadline stupid!"
3. Beats are still important, so are the right people with the right skills.
4. Journalists must be able to (in addition to reporting and writing) edit video, edit audio, have a blog and (controversially to much disagreement from students and educators) offer their services for free.
5. Journalists need each other now so they should talk about their relationships with each other.

In the session "Doing less with less" editors talked about how institutions like the JSE are contributing to the shrinking economic base of mags like the *Financial Mail* by withdrawing all the paid-for information that was crucial to both readers and media companies.

Tim Cohen FM's editor, Mapi Mhlanga news editor of eNCA, and Pheladi Gwangwa, station manager of 702, all agreed that to cut back on investment in actual journalism and journalists was very shortsighted.

Styli Charalambous of the only all-digital publication *Daily Maverick* said "for us it has always been less, we have never had more; it has been guerrilla warfare from day one". The *Maverick* gets about 400 000 visitors but needs up to three million to break even. Nevertheless, he said, "we invest everything

in editorial", but, "it's tough waiting for the digital tide to come in."

A very interesting side issue for me as a journalism educator was the references to "slow" and "fast" journalism - the new markers of distinction and routine creation. Almost everybody agreed that to distinguish between the facility of social media and the web (and of course radio) as carriers of the fast, new and breaking allowed one also to place emphasis on the slow, developing, important, investigative and time-consuming but also very valuable information. Useful resources like Steve Buttry's Unbolt the Newsroom project (<http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2014/01/30/how-an-unbolted-newsroom-works/>) were shared around.

In addition to all the talking there were workshops at MMX14 and one of the most helpful was Gus Silber's one on using Instagram (out of which the now financially successful Humans of New York project came). Silber's principles for riding the digital disruption are shareable:

1. Embrace the technologies
2. Think and work across media
3. Be your own newsroom
4. Be social
5. Share
6. Learn to be a hacker - find out things and solutions
7. Be nimble (don't let a story brew)
8. Learn to work within and around limitations
9. Be connected and wired
10. Carry a notebook and pen (the technology does fail!)

Everything is already digital

I first encountered Mindy McAdams via her hyperlinked masters thesis on the internet when I moved to Rhodes to teach and had to start thinking about the digital (that was the same year as the first Highway Africa conference, 1997). This year McAdams (see <http://mindymcadams.com/tojou/>) who teaches digital journalism at the University of Florida came and spent about four months with us helping us to think deeply about what we're teaching and how and why.

McAdams thinks the upheaval we've been living through started in 1995. It's a transition without end and she thinks we're still in the "adolescence of the internet". Its hallmarks are:

1. Variety: more sources, less monopoly, nobody has a captive audience.
2. Time: it's 24/7 - there is no waiting.
3. Place: wherever you want it.
4. Trust - there's a great deal of uncertainty about sources of news and a casual

attitude to “the news”.

5. The media business model is in terminal decline.
6. Authority – shifting from traditional sources of information to start-ups like the *Huffington Post*.

So what does this mean for those of us who teach future journalists? McAdams’ mantra is “everything is already digital”. She looks at what skills are in demand now and then thinks about how education incorporates those into curricula:

1. Collaboration and participation with audiences – this she says is a very big part of the challenge of change. This is not the same as vox pops, or citizen journalism, or user-generated content, or the old sourcing models. It is encouraging the audience to interact not only with the site, content or journalists but also with each other.
2. Aggregation and curation have become really important forms of doing journalism and student journalists have to be trained how to do these properly.
3. Data graphics and data analysis are key. But as in all shifts in technology the trick is to learn to train oneself and to teach students to train themselves in the tools. Data is not just a thing for its own sake. The use of data tools should be linked to answering the real and important questions audiences have; and the mining of public sources is really important.
4. Photos and video are important. Students must have photo-editing skills and short video documentary ability. Neither of these require full immersion in the technology, but a small suite of key skills.
5. Social media for sharing and mining for sources and new voices. But the key here is that it should be used in a professional manner.
6. Apps and digital-only products require familiarity and use.
7. Audience research is vital – especially analysis of what people are doing with your content.
8. Fact-checking and sourcing is imperative, as is “evidence tracking”. It also lifts the professional journalist into a realm many amateurs can’t sustain. Understanding copyright and plagiarism is essential.

McAdams pointed to the site <http://advancingthestory.wordpress.com/> as a particularly helpful one to keep the focus on telling good and useful stories rather than getting wound up in the technological proficiency. She also said: “There is not a model everybody can follow and we are all

burdened by the legacy structures.”

Learning though modelling

Just as McAdams was preparing to leave us, Janet Kolodzy (Emerson College in Boston and author of *Practising Convergence Journalism: An Introduction to Cross-Media Storytelling*) arrived, giving us no chance to forget what we’d started or to slack off.

Kolodzy urged us as teachers to “lead by example” and model what we want to see our students learn and do. She took us through a recent report done by the Poynter Institute into core skills for journalists (http://www.newsu.org/course_files/CoreSkills_FutureofJournalism2014v5.pdf) in which they first came up with about a hundred! They then narrowed these down to 37. In powerful contrast to the many words proliferating about this situation, Kolodzy is refreshingly brief and focused. She has her own list and it consists of just four essential skills:

1. Thinking
2. Reporting
3. Writing
4. Producing

This short list is positioned against another list which constitutes “convergence thinking” which is:

- Audience-centric
- Story-driven (both narrative and non-narrative)
- Tool neutral
- Professional – disciplined and consistent (the hallmarks of journalists not amateurs).

Kolodzy sees journalists working on a spectrum of news which ranges from:

Short
Fast
Now
News
Which serves

To:

Deep
Interactive
Contextual
Which gets saved.

Her response to choices about whether to teach certain skills deeply and intensely (such as photography and intimate knowledge of photoshop) or whether to go the Jack of all trades route, is to think “interdisciplinary not multidisciplinary”. Know something deeply and well, know some things about other skills, work with those who have skills you don’t – seems to be the most sensible approach.

And she warns: “Make your curriculum

flexible, more change is coming, you have to believe in journalism as a self-correcting system.” The mantra here is “sustainable adaptation”.

Down and dirty

Both McAdams and Kolodzy use blogs as a central vehicle for the journalism they teach because the technology is simple and doesn’t require coding knowledge (unless you want to “get under the hood and make it purr” – Kolodzy) and the form allows for video, audio, photography, writing, curating, organisation and engagements with audiences via connected social media. Setting up a blog means that a purpose, an audience, a mission must all be decided by students themselves. Categories and navigation are key to underlining the purpose and mission of the journalism. The crucial elements are:

- A blog name which has meaning and purpose.
- An about section which sets the purpose and mission and says who is behind the site.
- Categories and navigation.
- The home page must be big and bold and visual.
- Speak directly to the reader and engage them directly in what the site will do for them (adopt a more personal tone which comes with this form of media).
- Play with it and change it (the technology allows you to avoid setting your choices in stone).
- Use rich elements: photographs, video and audio – short clips are best.
- Liveness is in the look, the tone of the writing, the personal approach and the conversations generated.
- Make connections in stories – give more than just information.
- Be professional – accuracy, contacts, ethics
- Use social media in conjunction with the blog.
- Fiddle with the possibilities of the technology, pick and choose the widget options.
- Links, give the reader more!
- Get other voices in, make the blog a platform for the audience and important members of your community (which may not be geographical).

