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 (MMXi4), organised by Laurie Bley of Duke University and Patrick Conroy of eNCA and held in Johannesburg in July.

“Digital disruption” doesn’t fallen 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 snapshots (or instgrams) of this year so far:

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**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 Mennell 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 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 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 through 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).