Keynote: Terry McDonell
The Evolution, Mutation and Rebirth of City and Regional Magazines

McDonell, former top editor for thirteen magazines including Sports Illustrated, Esquire and Rolling Stone, says he has always thought of himself as a journalist first. He witnessed the birth of New Journalism in 1968 when Clay Felker decided to put shopping and politics together in New York Magazine. “It was revolutionary,” says McDonell. “At the time I was clueless about city and regional magazines.” That bold move also begged the question – what is a city magazine? McDonell says it was soon obvious. “City magazines are a brilliant idea,” he says. “Cliff sniffed at the consumer revolution but delivered the intellectual goods as well.” Fast-forward fifty years and the Media Lab at MIT offers a class that treats local journalism as an engineering problem. “The arc between the two represents the timeline of my career and through it all the need for hyper-local journalism has gotten stronger.”

McDonell acknowledges that newspapers are struggling. “The important work is being done by city and regional magazines as they step up and fill in important journalistic work,” he says. McDonell, who worked at five city and regional magazines, describes them as ‘tribal’. To this point, when Rolling Stone choose the tagline – All the News That Fits – they knew it was the tribe that knew what fit. McDonell says each city and regional magazine has its own tribe. “You service your readers, you do noble work,” he says. “And it is critical that the work be authentic.” Besides, he adds, getting real is the most fun. There also needs to be a balance of what he calls high camp and low camp. “You need a balance of useful information, plus coverage of style, topical issues and political news,” he says. Ultimately, he explains, city and regional magazines help the reader know where they stand in the world.

McDonell rejects the idea that magazines are going by the wayside. Yet he acknowledges that good journalism is even more challenging as deadlines are getting faster and faster. But he cautions replacing innovative journalism with less expensive digital content. “This does not work. Data without insight is just that,” he says. Magazines have to have credibility for their tribe. “Content and quality journalism is always important.” Now that websites, social media and apps deliver news on demand everything is up for grabs. “Some of the best editors have become brand managers, it’s a good way for editor’s to think of themselves,” he says.

When McDonell evaluates a magazine the first thing he does is underline everything he doesn’t understand. “Your readers need to know they are in good hands,” he says. Readers should be able to read your magazine back to front and have a sense of
themselves and a sense of place. The pages must also be compelling. “And you need to be confrontational sometimes,” he adds.

Despite the recent war on the press McDonell says reporting is getting stronger across all media platforms especially in the city and regional magazines where “gifted people are doing complicated work more or less collaboratively.” McDonell says every city and regional magazine he has edited has had it’s own narrative. “The narrative of an individual magazine is fluid, ironic and full of nuances and I like that about city and regional magazines.”

Terry McDonell is a writer, editor and media executive with experience across many platforms. He was inducted into the ASME Editors Hall of Fame in 2012. He is a novelist, poet and has written and produced for film and television. He co-founded the literary review website LitHub. He is president of the board of The Paris Review and serves on the Board of Overseers of the Columbia Journalism Review. His memoir The Accidental Life: An Editor’s Notes on Writing and Writers was published in 2016 by Knopf.