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Media Ecology as a Scholarly Activity

President's Address
Third Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association
Marymount Manhattan College
June 21–23, 2002

Lance Strate¹

IN 1969, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner published a book that turned the field of education upside down. The title of that book was *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. In 1979, Postman published a sequel that turned his earlier work upside down. Its title was *Conquering a Conservative Today*. I would prefer to load things right side up to Neil Postman through the title of my talk, which is “Media Ecology as a Scholarly Activity.”

Postman formally introduced the term *media ecology* in 1968, in an address he gave at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English. It was later published under the title of “The Reformed English Curriculum” (Postman, 1970) and in it he suggested that by 1980 high schools may no longer be offering English as a subject. Instead of English, Postman argued that high schools ought to be teaching media ecology. It was, to say the least, a modest proposal. Now I don’t know of many English teachers who lost their jobs on account of media ecology. But standing before all of you today, addressing the Third Annual Meeting of the Media Ecology Association, I do think that we’ve done all right for ourselves.

In his 1968 speech, Postman tried to answer the question, “What is media ecology?” More than thirty years later, we are still trying to answer that question. It’s not that we don’t have any answers—we most certainly do. Postman defined media ecology as “the study of media as environments” (Postman, 1970, p. 161), although it would be equally true to say that it is “the study of environments as media.” And the MEA’s Constitution states that “media ecology is defined as the study of the complex set of relationships or interrelationships among symbols, media and culture” (Constitution, 2002, p. 73). These are answers we can live with, some of us may even like them, but it is not the answers that we love most of all, it’s the questions. We love to ask questions about media and technology, about communication, consciousness, and culture, about contexts and environments. And we love to ask questions about paradigms and perspectives, including our own.

We love to ask, “What is media ecology?” and we also love to ask, “Who is media ecology?” Certainly, one answer to that question is, “Media ecology is us” (“Media ecology are us?” “Media ecology am us?”). And it is true that every discipline is a product of its practitioners, and all associations are extensions of their individual members. Disciplines and associations are a type of media, and Marshall McLuhan (1964) taught us that media are *the extensions of man*. In other words, media are not not human; they are not inhuman, not antihuman, not even posthuman. As Frank Dance (1967; Dance & Larson, 1976) rightly insists, our media are extensions of human communication. And as Paul Levinson (1988, 1997) explains, our media evolve anthropotri-

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cally, that is, in relationship to the human, and in favor of the human. Or to put it another way, media environments are extensions of our *human* ecology.

Walter Ong (1962, 1986; see also Farrell, 2000) takes the position known as personalism, which is defined as the philosophy of the human person. Personalism is intrinsic to the religious philosophy of Martin Buber (1958), the educational philosophy of Paolo Freire (1970), and the media philosophy that Ong has shared with us, and that we now share with him. Media ecologists are personalists, and as such we find it natural to ask *who is media ecology* in order to explain *what is media ecology*.

One obvious answer to the question of “Who is media ecology?” could have been that “Neil Postman is media ecology.” But, to his credit, when Postman (1970) introduced the term, he told his audience that “the first thing to be said about media ecology is that I am not inventing it. I am only naming it” (p. 161). And having named it, Postman then proceeded to name names. He announced that there had been approximately twelve media ecologists who were no longer alive, and he listed six: Harold Innis, Norbert Wiener, Alfred North Whitehead, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Edward Bellamy. He also said that there were about twenty “living media ecologists” (p. 161), and his list included Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Jacques Ellul, Peter Drucker, Buckminster Fuller, Edmund Carpenter, Edward T. Hall, and David Riesman.

From this humble beginning of some thirty-odd individuals, the media ecology tribe has been fruitful and multiplied. In part, this has been due to the success of media ecology education as pioneered by McLuhan, Carpenter, Ong, and Postman, and by others like Louis Forsdale, Frank Zingrone, Gary Gumpert, Christine Nystrom, Terence Moran, Donald Theall, and James Carey. But it also has been due to the fact that we have successfully identified the unsung media ecologists of the past. Postman left open the question of who is and who is not a media ecologist, and this means that any given scholar, critic, or writer could potentially be recognized as a media ecologist. It doesn’t matter whether they call themselves media ecologists, or whether they see themselves as doing media ecological work. It doesn’t matter whether they’ve even heard of media ecology, or whether the term existed during their lifetimes. It is not up to them to determine whether they are media ecologists—it is up to us.

Postman also left open the question of media ecology’s origins, implying the existence of some twelve apostles, but no anointed one, no founding father, no mother goddess (as Leonard Shlain would have it). The question remains open, but there has been no shortage of answers. To Paul Levinson, media ecology is McLuhan, plain and simple. Camille Paglia prefers the trinity of McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, and Norman O. Brown as representatives of a distinctly North American intellectual tradition. Robert K. Logan identifies media ecology with the Toronto School of Communication, and therefore begins with Harold Innis. To Joshua Meyrowitz, it is the combination of the Toronto School and the Chicago School’s George Herbert Mead. Alternately, Edmund Carpenter has pointed to the Harvard anthropologist Dorothy Lee. Donald Theall argues for a more literary starting point, specifically James Joyce. Gary Gumpert begins with Walter Benjamin. Susan Barnes considers Norbert Wiener the first ecologically minded communications theorist. Walter Ong and Eric Havelock focus on orality–literacy studies and trace our tradition back to Milman Parry.

Both Christine Nystrom and William Kuhns start with Lewis Mumford’s distinctive ecology of technics. Nystrom has also traced our roots back to Susanne Langer, and additionally both she and Louis Forsdale name Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf as our progenitors. For Scott Eastham it was Buckminster Fuller who started the ball rolling. To James Maroosis and Aquilles Este, our lineage begins with Charles Saunders Peirce, founder of pragmatism and semiotics.

James Carey has singled out the Scottish biologist Patrick Geddes, the founder of urban studies and human ecology. Douglas Rushkoff has suggested that we are the offspring of the mother of science fiction, Mary Shelley. David Linton, Harold Bloom, and Marshall McLuhan all have nominated William Shakespeare as the inventor of the human person and the accompanying media ecological point of view. Eric Havelock, Neil Postman, and Leonard Shlain remind us of such ancient media ecologists as Plato, Moses, and Abraham. Some have even implied that God himself is a media ecologist, and who's to say it isn't true?

This search for roots is a form of intellectual play, and playfulness is most definitely part of the media ecology tradition. But play is also serious business. And while there is no definitive solution to the problem of who is the founder of media ecology, it is in this multitude of possibilities that we can begin to answer the question of who, and what, media ecology is. So let us play on.

But as we think about who we are, we also need to think about how we talk about ourselves. My colleague Ed Wachtel has asked me to tell you that we should not refer to ourselves as media ecologists, because it makes us sound like we have pretensions of being scientists. And he has a point. Of course, Postman uses the designation *media ecologist* in his 1968 speech, but back then most everyone in the liberal arts was pretending to be a scientist. I use the term as well, but mostly informally, in the spirit of play, and as a term of endearment. I use it now, when we're talking amongst ourselves in the privacy of our own back region. Here, among friends, calling each other media ecologists is amusing. Out there, among strangers, we run the risk of amusing ourselves to death.

Ray Gozzi, Jr. (1999) reminds us to be mindful of *the power of metaphor*, to be aware of language as a medium, of its influence on our thoughts and actions. Otherwise, we may find ourselves confronted by the question, "Are you now, or have you ever been a media ecologist?" Or, at least, "Are you or are you not a media ecologist?" And of course, we should not look at media ecology in either-or terms. There is no single determining factor, no sole criterion, no litmus test, no oath of allegiance. Sure, there are dues to be paid to become an MEA member, and I would encourage that sort of activity, but that is another matter entirely. The point is that some of us may be working on media ecology as a theoretical framework, or may be examining its intellectual roots. Others may be applying media ecology ideas and methods in their research, criticism, or teaching. Still others may be combining media ecology with other approaches and activities, and some may find media ecology only of occasional relevance to their work.

But first and foremost we are students and teachers, theorists and researchers, critics and creators, writers and artists, intellectuals and practitioners, all of whom share an interest in *doing* media ecology work in some form or another. Media ecology is something we do, which is to say that media ecology is, above all else, an activity. It is more than a group of people, intellectual network, or members of an association. It is more than an organization, a program, or school. It is more than a body of work, perspective, or paradigm. It is more than a science, discipline, or subject. Back in 1968, Postman explained, "Media ecology is a field of inquiry. Fields of inquiry imply the active pursuit of knowledge. Discoveries. Explorations. Uncertainty. Change. New questions. New methods. New terms. New definitions" (Postman, 1970, p. 163). In short, Postman presents media ecology as a scholarly activity, and I can think of no better time than now to celebrate our scholarship.

If we had to find a model for excellence in media ecology scholarship, we need look no further than the keynote speaker for the 2002 MEA convention, Elizabeth Eisenstein (e.g., 1980). We could also look to her fellow historians of print media, such as Lucien Febvre (e.g., Febvre &

Martin, 1976), Henri-Jean Martin (e.g., 1994), and S. H. Steinberg (e.g., Steinberg & Trevitt, 1996). And we could turn to the historical and literary analyses of Eric Havelock (especially, 1978) and Walter Ong (especially, 1958), to the anthropological research of Jack Goody (e.g., 1986, 1987), and to the archeological studies of Denise Schmandt-Besserat, (e.g., 1992), who literally uncovered the origins of writing. And we could and should remember the sociological scholarship of the late David Riesman (e.g., Riesman, Denney, & Glazer, 1950). This is just a representative sample of media ecology role models, not an exhaustive list. After all, we don't have all night. What we do have is a tradition of scholarly activity worthy of recognition and respect, and one of the MEA's main missions is to support and encourage this scholarship.

And no one in this organization has done more to uphold the integrity of media ecology scholarship than our Vice-President, Casey Man Kong Lum. Apart from conducting his own ethnographic research, Casey has been responsible for establishing and running the MEA's affiliate programs at the annual conventions of the National Communication Association. For the past three years he has worked hard to ensure that our sessions meet the highest possible standards, and that the MEA maintains its reputation for exceptional scholarship. Casey has taken responsibility for the public face of our association, the presentation of media ecology in academic life, and I want to acknowledge his efforts and applaud his achievements.

Organizations such as NCA feature competitive paper sessions at their conventions. As many of you know, this involves the blind review and ranking of submitted papers, and the public recognition of the most highly ranked submissions. Competitive papers reflect what Ong (1981, 1982) calls the agonistic tone of traditional scholarship, its roots in dialogue and debate. As an affiliate of other organizations, we have had programs that featured competitive papers in media ecology. And in order to promote media ecology scholarship here at home, we will be adding them to next year's MEA convention. This means that we will identify and honor our top papers.

And this will include an award for top student paper. We think it is important to foster undergraduate and graduate student work in media ecology, and we want to encourage student involvement in the MEA. For this reason, our top student papers will be rewarded with a scholarship that includes the MEA's annual membership and convention registration fees. And we have decided to name this scholarship after Linda Elson, a student and scholar of media ecology whose untimely death last year saddened so many of us. We hope that the Linda Elson Scholars of the future serve as a fitting memorial to our friend and fellow-traveler, an individual who was truly committed to our field of inquiry.

We stand together as a community of scholars, which is something more than just a professional organization. Ecology is the study of households and habitats, and it follows that media ecology scholars have always been interested in understanding community. Even more so, as personalists as well as ecologists, we recognize the value of community, the need to preserve and promote community as the fundamental medium of the human person.

Elizabeth Eisenstein (1980) has shown how the printing revolution in early modern Europe led to the creation of a new kind of community among scholars, one that came to be called a republic of letters. It was a virtual community based on media such as the printed book, the pamphlet, and the periodical. And if there is any one medium that came to be emblematic of the republic of letters, it was the scholarly journal.

This year the MEA is reinforcing our own republic of letters by introducing our own scholarly journal, *Explorations in Media Ecology*. The first issue is almost ready for printing, and should be showing up in the mailboxes of MEA members very soon. The MEA is publishing this journal in partnership with Hampton Press, which will insure its wide distribution to libraries and

educational institutions well beyond the reach of our humble association. Of course, it wouldn't hurt if you would encourage your own home institutions to subscribe to *Explorations in Media Ecology*. I can guarantee you that they won't be disappointed. And I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge Barbara Bernstein of Hampton Press. Without her support, it would have taken years to get our journal off the ground. On a personal note, back in 1995, Barbara approved my proposal to edit a book series in media ecology for Hampton Press, and this proved to be an important first step towards forming the Media Ecology Association. She has truly been a great friend to our field, and I want to express my gratitude to her.

Explorations was the name of the first journal of media ecology, edited by Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, and published from 1953 to 1959. In many ways, the first *Explorations* opened up our field of inquiry, and in doing so established a legacy that we are proud to continue. It is a legacy of interdisciplinary exchange and intellectual experimentation, and it is our goal to maintain that approach, without compromising our tradition of outstanding scholarship. As Eisenstein (1980) makes clear, the process of publication has been instrumental in fostering intellectual progress. And in this vein, *Explorations in Media Ecology* will publish the best that our field has to offer, and in doing so advance our discipline. We will have rigor without rigor mortis, and I can think of no one more committed to this vision than Judith Yaross Lee, who is co-editing the journal with me. Judith is an experienced editor and an accomplished media ecology scholar. A call for papers appears in the program, and I ask you to answer the call and submit your best work to our journal.

This is indeed the year to celebrate our scholarship, as we will also see the publication of the juried *Proceedings* of our annual conventions. The first volume, drawn from our inaugural meeting, is edited by Mark Lipton and Janet Sternberg; the second, selected from papers presented last year, is edited by Donna Flayhan; and the third, drawn from this year's convention participants, will be edited by Margot Hardenbergh. These volumes will be published online on the MEA website and will serve as a resource for our membership, and for scholars from all disciplines and all corners of the globe. I should add that the MEA owes a debt of gratitude to James Morrison and Paul Kelly for maintaining our website, and for the Herculean labors that have been going into its redesign. When version 2.0 of media-dash-ecology-dot-org is finally online in the near future, it will serve as world-wide window on our organization and our scholarship.

As a community of scholars, our organization coalesced out of the virtual community of the media ecology listserv, and I must thank Stephanie Gibson for keeping that channel open. I also want to applaud Ray Gozzi, Jr., the Editor of our newsletter, *In Medias Res*, for continuing to produce a periodical that is essential to the well-being of our association.

We are a community of scholars, and never more so than when we come together for our annual meetings. The MEA gives academics, artists, and activists a chance to share their thoughts and experiences. It provides an open forum for physicians, physicists, and college presidents to present their ideas and engage in philosophical discussions. And I want to thank our Convention Coordinators David Linton and Laura Tropp for the phenomenal job they have done this year. They have moved our annual meeting to a new level of size, complexity, and quality, and they deserve our gratitude. Thank you, David and Laura, and thanks go to everyone else who has contributed their time and effort to making this year's convention a success.

Next year's convention will be hosted by Hofstra University, and we look forward to great things from George Back, Dean of Hofstra's School of Communication, and from our 2003 Convention Coordinators, Susan Drucker and Barbara Kelley. Their preliminary call for papers appears in the convention program, and I ask you to answer the call. I should take this opportunity

to note that the MEA Board is in the process of considering sites for our annual meeting in 2004 and beyond. We invite proposals and queries from any institution interested in hosting our convention in the years to come.

Our community of scholars is a passionate and vital community, and I believe that we have a bright future ahead of us. But it takes a great deal of organizational work to support our association and create opportunities for advancing our scholarship. I want to thank Bill Petkanas for serving as Chair of the Nominations Committee and running the elections for our Board of Directors last year, and doing so again this year. And I want to thank my fellow Board members for the time and energy they have devoted to our association. In particular, I want to acknowledge the ongoing contributions of Thom Gencarelli as MEA's Treasurer. And most of all I want to recognize the enormous debt that we all owe to our Executive Secretary, Janet Sternberg, for her incredible efforts in helping to organize this convention, and helping to keep our association organized all year round.

In a little while, we will be presenting our annual MEA awards, and I have to tell you that the competition for these awards has really been heating up. This makes the task of judging the submissions increasingly more difficult. The names of our judges are listed in the program, and I want to let them know that their efforts are appreciated. Through our awards program, we celebrate the best of media ecology manifesting as a variety of activities: as scholarship, as teaching, as a creative activity, and as political action. The call for the 2003 Awards is in the program, and I ask you to answer that call wherever and whenever it is appropriate to do so, to apply for these awards, or to nominate those you think are deserving. It's more work for the judges, but we are better for the competition. I also want to acknowledge Douglas Rushkoff for introducing the Mary Shelley Award for outstanding fictional work, which we will present for the first time next year.

Back in 1968, when Neil Postman introduced media ecology to the National Council of Teachers of English and presented his list of thirty media ecologists, he said, "In one way or another, each . . . is asking the kinds of questions that are characteristic of media ecology. For example, their questions have to do with the present and the future. Mostly the future. Their questions also have to do with our chances of survival, and how to prepare ourselves intellectually and emotionally for media environments most of us do not quite believe in, and which we may not be able to control" (Postman, 1970, p. 161).

The theme of survival comes up repeatedly in Postman's address. And the theme of survival came up repeatedly in public discourse back in the sixties. By the end of the seventies, this concern had just about dissipated. But today we are gathered here, just a few miles away from a place now known as Ground Zero, just a few months away from a time we might know as zero hour, 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001. And survival is once more on our minds.

Back in 1968, Postman emphasized the survival value of media ecology as a scholarly activity. He did so, not because *media ecologists* have all of the *answers*. They didn't back then, and we still don't today. Rather, it is because *media ecology scholars* ask the right *questions*. That is who we are, that is what we do, and that is how we can make a difference.

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