President's Message

The Continued Self-Organization of the MEA
Lance Strate, MEA President
Fordham University

Systems theory tells us that when parts work together they can form an interdependent union in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This phenomenon has been referred to as self-organization, autopoesis, and synergy (the latter term, coined by Buckminster Fuller, now a buzzword in marketing and promotion, but originally one with much wider implications). The process is not necessarily a smooth one, however, as systems may hit some bumps and bifurcations before achieving a stable organization (or, alternately, giving in to entropy and dissolution). We have now come to one such bifurcation point as we seek to achieve a more effective form of self-organization.

"One key concern was to simplify our organizational structure."

At last year's Inaugural MEA Convention, the membership voted into effect our organization's constitution, and thereby formally constituted ourselves as an organization. But we also agreed that the constitution we passed was in need of revision, and that we would study the matter and vote on proposed revisions at the next convention. This past February, substantive discussions were held during a combined meeting of the MEA's Executive Committee, Board of Directors, and Board of Advisors. In attendance were the five elected officers, Sue Barnes, Thom Gencarelli, Casey Lum, Janet Sternberg, and myself, along with board members James Carey, Susan Drucker, Stephanie Gibson, Gary Gumpert, Paul Levinson, Joshua Meyrowitz, Christine Nystrom, and Neil Postman. Discussions

covered the organization as a whole, its practices and plans for the future, as well as how the organization is constituted.

In our discussions, one key concern was to simplify our organizational structure, which at present includes three separate bodies, the Executive Committee (composed of elected officers), a Board of Directors and an Advisory Board (members of either board appointed by the executive committee). The proposed solution is that we eliminate the Advisory Board, and combine the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee. The new Board

A New Format for Newsletter

The Newsletter has a new editor and we'll be experimenting with some new looks. We are aiming to issue two newsletters a year, with current information about MEA members and activities.

Also, we want to reflect the vibrant intellectual activity of our membership. So send along excerpts from your books, articles, or just plain interesting thoughts!
You can contact the editor:

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President's Message (cont.)

would be composed of twelve members, all of whom would be elected by the membership for three year terms. The terms would be staggered so that each year we would be voting for four members of the Board. Five members of the board would serve as the MEA's elected officers (President, Vice-President, Executive Secretary, Treasurer, and Historian) and therefore function as the Executive Committee. The officers would be elected each year by the board itself.

In this way, we would guarantee democratic participation in the MEA's leadership while avoiding the instability that plagues many other smaller organizations. The executive committee will retain the ability to name Appointed Officers, which at present include Stephanie Gibson as media ecology listserv owner, Mary Ann Allison as Internet Strategist, John McDaid as Webmaster, Mark Lipton as Art Director, Susan Cook as Public Relations Coordinator, and Ray Gozzi, Jr. as Editor of this newsletter, In Medias Res. It will also retain the right to create committees, including an Advisory Committee that will replace the Advisory Board.

> **"The proposed solution is that we eliminate the Advisory Board, and combine the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee."**

An additional revision being proposed concerns the manner in which we conduct elections. At present, elections are held at the annual convention's business meeting. This means that anyone not attending the convention is disenfranchised, which is problematic for an international organization such as our own. It would therefore make more sense to conduct our elections by mail (or its equivalent) following the annual convention, i.e., during the fall. Along the same lines, while we currently must vote on amendments to the constitution at the annual convention, the proposed revision would require that voting on further changes be conducted by mail (or its equivalent).

Will these changes be the last that we make to our constitution? Hopefully not! Associations that are much larger and older than us continue to change their organizational structure over time. Self- organization is an ongoing process. Systems must constantly adapt themselves to meet the demands of their environments, and they must renew themselves to survive over time. Our goal is not stasis, but homeostasis, a balance that combines continuity with flexibility. Of course, we do hope that the proposed changes will be sufficient to carry the MEA through to the next bifurcation point, a point further along in our future.

The Media Ecology Association is Now Officially Incorporated

An Interview with Treasurer Thom Gencarelli

Q: What does "incorporation" of the Media Ecology Association mean?

Thom G.: Incorporation means that we are a recognized professional entity--that we no longer exist as an Association simply because a bunch of us collectively say we do. We have an application and a record on file with the Federal and state government. We can legitimately bring in revenues, keep an account, and make expenditures. We have proof of existence, a corporate seal, and a tax-exempt I.D. number, all of which we need when doing business with other organizations and corporations (like a university, a hotel, or a print shop, for instance). So it's really about operating as a business. And we are a business. We solicit money from people, who pay for the service we offer. They pay to become members, because this is in their professional interest, in all kinds of ways, for all kinds of reasons. And they pay to come to the conference, for the benefits that attendance and participation at the conference bring them.

Q: Why is incorporation desirable?

Thom G.: My knee-jerk, wise guy answer is so that people no longer have to make checks out to me! But the real reasons are stated in my answer to your first question--the basic, practical reasons. Incorporation was the most direct route to attain our status, to legitimize us. In addition, should we now choose to pursue 501c3 status as a not-for-profit corporation, we've completed the first step in the process. Understand: We are a non-profit corporation. And someone's membership dues are tax deductible, say, because he or she is an academic and it's an educational expense. However, monies given to us are not tax-deductible in the strictest sense of the term. That is, I cannot, as treasurer, write on a receipt that your payment, contribution, donation, whatever, is tax-deductible. That's up to you and your accountant. Unless/until we go for the 501c3. By the way, I learned all of this in the course of doing it; by the seat of my pants. I wish someone had told it all to me in the first place!

Q: Are we going to aggressively start colonizing the Third World, or trying to corner the market on valuable commodities, like other corporations?

Thom G.: As students, scholars, and folks with an deep-seated interest in media and culture, I think we'll always be pretty sensitive to and vigilant about imperialistic tendencies from within our ranks. On the other hand, it would be great to see folks from the "Third World" in these ranks. And I, for one, will be the first to advocate for a conference in, say...Sri Lanka?

> **"We are a non-profit corporation....However, monies given to us are not tax-deductible in the strictest sense of the term....Unless/until we go for the 501c3 (status)."**

With respect to investing our vast riches toward our future...well, obviously, now is not the time to be thinking minority ownership in any other corporations. (Taken a look at a stock page lately?) I have heard, though, that pork bellies are a good bet in the immediate run. But then, of course, we'd alienate all of our members who are vegetarians and vegans.

Q: Anything else folks reading the Newsletter should know?

Thom G.: The Association's finances are now in great shape and becoming even stronger. And if I was going to embezzle or run off with the money, I blew my chance. Because now that we're incorporated, I can go to jail. So I guess I just want to thank everybody for trusting me with the Association's money up until this this time, this very important point in our existence.

Q: Thanks, Thom!

Hampton Press to Release 2nd Book in Media Ecology Series:
Susan Barnes Online Connections: Internet Interpersonal Relationships

"Boy meets girl on the Internet and they marry." The popular press is filled with stories about people who first meet online and then develop face-to-face relationships. This book uses a media ecological approach to explore the ways in which interpersonal relationships develop through internet correspondence. From first encounters to cyberdeath, each chapter examines emerging Internet culture and its impact on individuals and society.

The similarities and differences between face-to-face and mediated encounters are discussed along with the characteristics of internet relationships. These include fantasy, play, voluntary connection, and self-disclosure. In contrast to viewing computer-mediated communication as "virtual" encounters, this book explores the reality of interpersonal mediated communication by presenting case studies and examples of interpersonal correspondence, cyberdating, online communities, support groups, and electronic relationship building.

Excerpt from Chapter 11 of **Online Connections: Internet Interpersonal Relationships**
(Discussing online reactions to the death of Prof. Gerald M. Phillips.)

As the Internet becomes a more widely utilized medium, its increasngly more common for individuals to encounter each other first online before they meet in-person. For example, Chapter 7 describes cyberdating as a popular way for people to connect. Couples chat online and get to know each other before they meet face-to-face. To compensate for the missing visual and audio information, fantasy is an important aspect of Internet relationships. In many of these situations participants create imaginary descriptions about themselves to facilitate social interaction with others and play fantasy games.

> **"This raises the question of whether or not people can clearly present themselves to others through Internet only exchanges without having others invent a fantasy image."**

Although Internet interpersonal relationships include the elements of fantasy and play, participants in academic discussion lists tend to present themselves to others as their actual identities because correspondents use their real names and academic affiliations. Additionally, many members of academic lists know each other from offline professional settings, such as conferences, seminars, and university programs. However, as more people join these lists from a wider geographic range, individuals can encounter each other for the first time online. This raises the question of whether or not people can clearly present themselves to others through Internet only exchanges without having others invent a fantasy image.

Considering this question from the opposite perspective, Gerald M. Phillips became deeply concerned about how he presented himself to others through the Internet because the limited feedback made it difficult for him to understand how people were perceiving him. During his final days online, he asked a number of his Internet pals to tell him how they "saw" him. A portion of my answer to his question is described in Chapter 2. However, the real answer was revealed at the time of Phillips's death. An analysis of the spontaneous "virtual funeral" messages shared by his friends through the Internet provide a description of the way in which Phillips was perceived by others. Moreover, it reveals how people can present both an accurate and idealized concept of self through Internet environments. . . . .

A closer reading of the texts reveals some underlying discrepancies between the stated emotions and underlying feelings of the group. GMP's cyberdeath appeared to bring the group closer together, however, a closer examination (continued on next page) of the messzages shows that group members separated themselves into categories. A number of people made a point of stating whether or not they had ever met Phillips in person. For example, two people who had met him once about 20 years ago made a point of mentioning these encounters. Others expressed disappointment that they would now never be able to meet him. Although actually visiting Phillips was not a theme in the texts, there was an undercurrent of status associated with people who had really seen him face-to face and a sense of regret was expressed by those who

never did. For many people, reading his words on the list was not enough and they felt the need for more contact. This idea is analogous to the fan culture of recording artists because a higher level of individual status is associated with thenumber of times fans experience a live rather than mediated performance. For example, fans of the Grateful Dead would travel around the country to participate in live concerts. Another way that GMP's "fans" distinguished themselves from each other was by mentioning whether or not they exchanged personal email messages with him. Thus, the more contact people had with him through face-to-face or personal exchanges, the higher their status in the group.

> **"Relationships developed through the Internet feel as if they are real, but without the grounding of face-to-face reality, the feelings attached to them can be exaggerated."**

Additionally, a small number of respondents stopped lurking to express their feelings. These group members had been following Phillips's activities as strictly audience members and tended to place him in a "celebrity" category. As a result, there was a discrepancy in Phillips's eulogy descriptions between people who actually knew him face-to-face as a teacher and those who encountered him in Internet only exchanges. People who knew him only through the Internet tended to describe him as a celebrity and as being larger than life. Moreover, members who lived geographically on other continents also tended to idealize his net presence. Thus, the further people were removed (physically and culturally) from the American academic context in which Phillips presented himself, the more exaggerated his description became in the eulogy messages.

Upon first reading GMP's eulogy messages I was struck by the realistic depiction of the man. A number of his former students, including Mary McComb (1995) and Robert McKenzie (1995) sent messages that described in-person encounters with Phillips. However upon closer examination of the texts, an idealized vision of him began to emerge. For example, an idealized description states: "Your body may not be on this earth anymore, but your soul will still be around, hovering in this miraculous entity called cyberspace. Gerry, stay with us, we love you like a father" (de Moor, 1995).

While, several IPCT-L members stated that Phillips's vexing comments sometimes "drove them crazy" and they did not always agree with him, all agreed that his death would be a great loss to the group. People looked forward to reading his provocative posts and they knew the list would be a duller and quieter place without him. Whether or not people considered GMP to be their friend, members of IPCT-L did feel a genuine sense of loss when he died. . . .

Despite early claims that computers were inhuman, this technology can be used to express human feelings. Relationships developed through the Internet feel as if they are real, but without the grounding of face-to-face reality, the feelings attached to them can be exaggerated. On the surface, cyberspace may appear to be a place that brings people together. But underneath, there are deeper cultural currents that indicate a darker side that separates. Ironically, the new social status emerging in cyberspace is based on face-to-face contact. Consequently, the Internet's lack of sensual information may accentuate the need for in-person encounters.

Media Ecology Association on the Internet

The MEA Website is up and running at: **http://www.media-ecology.org**. There you will find information on our conventions, a media ecology reading list, and a growing number of features. All members are invited to contribute.

The MEA listserv is at: **mediaecology@ube.ubalt.edu**

Administrative requests regarding this list should be sent to **listserv@ube.ubalt.edu** The following commands can be handled automatically by the list processor:
        SIGNOFF mediaecology   - to remove yourself from the list
        REVIEW   mediaecology   - to get a list of subscribers
Monthly archives of mediaecology messages can be obtained from the file-server by sending an e-mail message to : fileserv@ube.ubalt.edu containing the single line: "SEND mediaecology.yyyy-mm" where yyyy is the year, and mm is the two digit month.

Douglas Rushkoff's <rushkoff@well.com> PBS Frontline documentary, 'The Merchants of Cool,' earned unprecedented ratings and media attention. Mediaecologists interviewed for this expose on media conglomerates and the manufacture of youth culture, included Mark Crispin Miller and Robert McChesney. Rushkoff's latest book "Coercion: Why We Listen to What 'They' Say" was released in a paperback edition by Penguin/Putnam. His novel, "Exit Strategy", will be released simultaneously in print and as an 'open source' novel online through Yahoo this summer.

Donna Flayhan <dflayhan@goucher.edu> has a Media Ecology article forthcoming in the New Jersey Journal of Communication" :

"Cultural Studies and Media Ecology: Meyrowitz's Medium Theory & Carey's Cultural Studies," Spring 2001, Vol. 9, No. 1 New Jersey Journal of Communication.

Philip Rose <an001@hwcn.org> from Hamilton, Ontario, writes:
I am just presently joining the Association, and plan to attend the upcoming conference in New York. I am planning to pursue a doctorate in 2002. I had a book published in 1998 called "Which One's Pink? The Concept Albums of Roger Waters and Pink Floyd" (Waters 1992 concept album "Amused to Death" was inspired by Postman's book). The name of the publisher is "Collector's Guide Publishing", and the approach I take in the book is essentially a hybrid of musical hermeneutics and various modes of literary criticism. A portion of the book formed my MA thesis in Music Criticism. I am presently seeking to publish a revised version of the book.
And I am presently working on another book project tentatively titled "'Pragmatism Not Idealism': Radiohead, the Computer, and the Global Movement for a Democratic Culture".

MEA Members are encouraged to send their news to the Editor: gozzi@ithaca.edu.

Second Convention of the Media Ecology Association June 15-16

Sponsored by the Department of Culture and Communication, New York University

LOCATION
Lipton Hall at the D'Agostino Residence, NYU Law School Campus in Greenwich Village
108 West Third Street (between Sullivan & MacDougal Streets)
New York, New York 10012

Information on the convention, registration, preliminary schedule, etc. are available on the MEA website: **www.media-ecology.org**. This site will also link you to the NYU web page with directions how to get there by subway, bus, plane, train, car. A separate mailing is also being sent to MEA members about the convention.

Questions? Email Convention Coordinator Janet Sternberg at: netberg@compuserve.com.

Getting to NYU by Subway
From Grand Central Station, take the **IRT Lexington Avenue subway (No. 6 train)** to Astor Place Station. Go west on Astor Place to Broadway. Walk south on Broadway to Waverly Place. Walk westward on Waverly Place until you reach Washington Square.

From Port Authority Bus Terminal, and Penn Station, take the **Eigth Avenue subway (A, C, or E train)** to West Fourth Street-Washington Square Station. Walk east on West Fourth St. toWashington Square

The Editor's Corner

Raymond Gozzi, Jr., Ithaca College

Will the computer retreive literacy?

While television has often been seen as an opponent of literacy (in the traadition of <u>Amusing Outselves to Death</u>), the computer has been held to be literacy's savior. After all, the argument goes, on the computer one must type, use proper grammar, etc. In "chat rooms" or on listservs, the power goes to the most articulate, and in this medium, that means the best writers.

I have always been suspicious of this argument. The form of the medium imposes limitations on the written content of computer communication. The electronic word is shorter and more fleeting than the printed word. Not that this is always a bad thing! But when an encyclopedia gets put on CD-ROM, the entries are shorter than in the book.

I recently bought a new computer, and new software. This experience added to my suspicions that the computer is not really a friend of literacy. My shiny new iMac came with an installation booklet--all pictures, no words. And some of the pictures were not as clear as they could have been--a caption would have been welcome. Which cable was going into which socket? Do these things have names? And what am I supposed to do with these CD-ROMS that come in a separate packet? No directions. The problems weren't serious--the iMac is so easy to hook up even a communications professor can do it. But they could have told me more about what I was doing.

In addition, there is some nice software already on the iMac, for instance AppleWorks (which used to be Claris Works). But no manuals were included. There is a help function in the program, and little balloons which pop up when you point at something on-screen. There is on-line help on the internet, I am told. But printed information? No luck.

I also spent big bucks to get Microsoft Office 2001. For my money I got a CD-ROM in a cute plastic case. No manuals. The "Help" functions let you enter a search term and get answers. But what if you call it a format and they call it a style? What if the procedures you used on an earlier version of the program have been changed? I had to spend more money to order books which explained the ins and outs of these programs.

I detect behind all of this a disdain for the printed word. The manuals get outsourced, you pay extra for them. The implication is that you don't really need them, that on-screen help can do the job. Yet as the software gets more complex and more sophisticated, you would think that the advantages of a book would become clearer, not be denigrated. The book index, for example, is better than a hypertext link, for it can "link" us to more than one page, and suggest where the topic is covered in depth. The ability to browse serendipitously through printed pages allows you to come across related topics which you hadn't known you needed to know about. This ability is seriously abbreviated in the small screens on line.

Yes, the computer currently uses text for most of its communications, but this is changing. Voice recognition programs allow you to control the computer through spoken commands. (My new iMac has speech functions with, however, no paper directions, so I haven't yet explored them.) Some day we will talk to our computers, and they will talk back, though not enough to carry on a real conversation. Then it will be clearer that the computer is not a savior of literacy. The computer, like television, will contribute to that curious cultural resurgence of orality and decline of literacy called by Ong "secondary orality."

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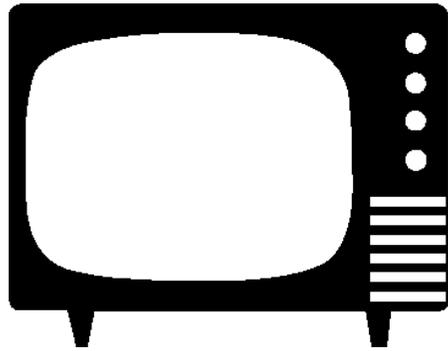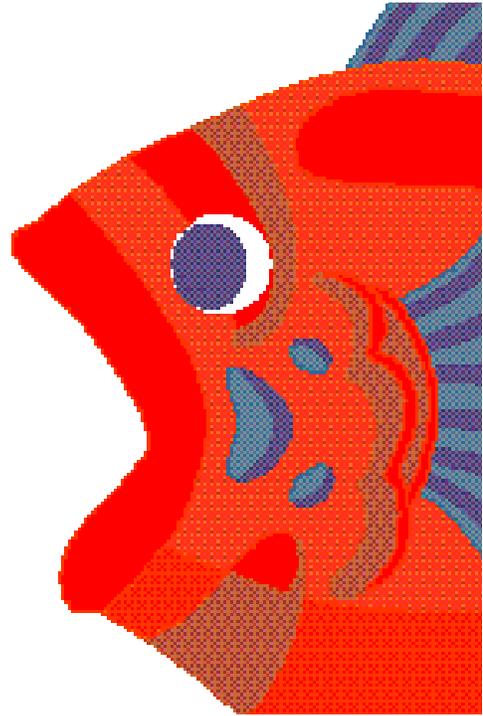
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