TERENCE MORAN
New York University

Foundations of media ecology: New York University

ABSTRACT

This article presents a personal history of the foundations and development of the Media Ecology Program at New York University by the sole surviving member of the founding faculty who argues for its continuing relevance to contemporary media analyses.

> What's past is prologue.
>
> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Two score and four years ago, the first New York University (NYU) Media Ecology Program Conference was held in 1972 at Su Casa, a Hippie hideaway in the Catskill Mountains. Our numbers were small – some 33 faculty, students and friends. The accommodations and food were organic Spartan – with heat and hot water luxuries and telephone and television non-existent. The weather was miserable – a cold hard rain fell the entire weekend. But the talk (what we Irish call the *craic*) and the camaraderie provided the motivation and the media that we needed to sustain our journeys into the undiscovered environments being shaped by what we then called the Communication Revolution.

All of us – faculty and students, lovers and friends – quickly recognized that these Media Ecology Conferences would provide needed times and spaces to help our fledging learning community to become a mature Commonwealth of

Communication – an ever-evolving gathering of bright, independent critical thinkers banding together to examine and analyse the roles played by media in shaping the contexts, codes, structures, contents and uses that form all human communication systems: from oral language – manifested primarily in speech but also in visible signs, symbols and rituals – through the transitions of literacy – manifested in first elite and then mass writing and reading, typography, graphic and hypergraphic imagery, electric and electronic technologies – to now the overlapping literacies of the cybernetic digital revolution that began in 1948 and continues to shape so much of today's media world. Neil Postman liked to call our explorations in these overlapping grounds of communication *context analyses*.

We began with three basic assumptions: *first*, that all media are not mere techniques and technologies for transmitting information but rather active environments in which peoples and cultures live; *second*, that we could best understand the ecology of all media environments through interdisciplinary-multidisciplinary-transdisciplinary approaches and, *third*, that professors and students were active learning partners in the new undertaking we called *Media Ecology* – a name chosen to free us from the theoretical tyrannies of traditional communication programmes and to provide us with the greatest latitude to redefine our fields of inquiry as we expanded our focus to include all human and human-created forms of communication in our explorations into the unknown frontiers of media studies.

In this historical exploration of media ecology at NYU, I am continuing a tradition established by Postman, who liked to provide historical and statistical updates on our doctoral programme at our Media Ecology Conferences until his passing in October 2003.

From our beginning, we were dedicated to the creation of an academic programme at the graduate level designed specifically to educate people about the meanings and consequence of the mass media of communication that form so significant a part of what Jacques Ellul called *The Technological Society* (1964). We hoped to create an environment of study that would educate scholars to provide leadership to both academic and professional business settings and to educate wider communities at local, national and global levels.

While the intellectual roots of media ecological thinking can be found in the very beginnings of recorded history, the institutional roots of the Media Ecology Program can be traced back to 1946 when Charles Siepmann established what became the Department of Communication in Education at the then School of Education at NYU. In 1967, after the retirement of Professor Siepmann and the departure of Professor George N. Gordon, NYU transferred the programmes in film, radio and television to the newly formed School of the Arts (now Tisch School of the Arts). Postman was asked to oversee the completion of studies by the students still enrolled in the theory parts of the programme that remained in our school.

Postman asked me, then his doctoral candidate and a tenure-track instructor, to help him in rescuing some of the Siepmann–Gordon courses – specifically The Communications Revolution and Culture in America, The Languages of Communication, The Mass Mind and Propaganda – in order to integrate them into a new programme called Language and Communication. (Fortunately, I had taken these courses during my undergraduate, masters and early doctoral studies.) The new programme, within the then Division of English, Speech and Educational Theatre, was offered in the 1967–68 academic year. This hybrid of linguistics, semantics and communication never quite

found its bearings, and when our leading linguist, Professor Sumner Ives, left NYU, Postman and I undertook to radically reconceptualize and redesign the programme. With the extraordinary contributions of Christine Nystrom, then one of our Ph.D. students in English Education and our sole teaching fellow, and our great friend Charles Weingartner, then at Queens College, CUNY, we received approval for our new MA programme – now called Media Ecology: Studies in Communication – in January 1970; in May 1971, our new doctoral programme was approved by New York State, and we waited to see if anyone would enroll in Fall 1971.

Fortunately, we were able to attract some 23 doctoral students, nineteen men and four women. Of these original 23 students – most of whom worked full time in academia or in corporate America and paid their own tuitions – thirteen completed their degrees, eleven men and two women. Of these, Postman chaired eight committees, I chaired four and Nystrom chaired one. In the following years, we continued to attract sufficient cohorts to keep the programme functioning, aided by a robust masters degree programme. To the best of my records and calculations, we graduated 178 Doctors of Philosophy in Media Ecology from September 1971 to May 2012. Given that the members of our first class were expected to complete their degrees in 1974, the number of doctoral graduates in the 38 years of the Media Ecology Program averaged 4.68 per year. Of the 178 doctoral graduates of our programme, 91 were male and 87 female, not quite even but quite close. Postman chaired 52 committees, while Nystrom and I chaired 41 each. The remaining 44 were chaired by ten other professors. Our very first graduate was David Guerra in 1974, whose wife Bobbi attempted to save all of us at the first Media Ecology Conference at Su Casa with generous servings of her specially made Sangria, liberally laced with Spanish brandy. In May 2012, we graduated our last Media Ecologist at NYU – Gerald LeBoff, known to many of us for his generous financial contributions to the Media Ecology Program over many years. 'Jerry' entered our programme in Fall 1983 and was not only our oldest graduate at 91 but also our longest-studying student, having studied in the programme over 29 years. The Media Ecology Doctoral Program existed from 1971 until 2006, when it was transformed into the current Doctoral Program in Media, Culture and Communication. The NYU Media Ecology Conferences lasted some 31 years, from 1972 until 2003. The final conference was held at the Williams Lake Hotel in Rosendale, New York, from 7 November to 9 November, one month after Postman's death in October. That conference was dedicated to Postman and carried the hope that his work would endure and prevail at NYU. As we said there in our dedication of the conference to Postman:

> Teacher, Mentor, Scholar, Writer, Founder, Leader, Colleague, Friend. None of us would be here this weekend without his vision, his dedication, his inspiration, and his leadership. We best honor his memory by carrying on the intellectual work he so nobly advanced. If we see further, it is because we stand on the shoulders of a giant.

Despite these words, that last conference served more to bury Postman than to honour him. Without Postman, the faculty in the department retreated from the dangerous explorations of the unknown to the safe harbours of traditional academic conventions.

In 'Social Science as Moral Theology', Postman had warned against rigid adherence to methods and methodologies, advocating a willingness to tell stories that would enhance the survival of peoples, cultures and civilizations. Acknowledging the difficulties involved, Neil noted:

> Of course, this cannot be done without risk. It means that most of us will generate piles of junk – unconvincing stories without credible documentation, sound logic, or persuasive argument. After all, how many Louis Mumfords or Walter Ongs or Lynn Whites or Jacques Elluls are there? […] It is a risk that must be borne. The alternative is to remain a shriveled pseudo-science, useless for anything except the assembly-line production of Ph.D.s.
>
> (Postman 1988: 17)

The continuing relevance of the media ecological approach can be found in a *New York Times* front page story on 29 May 2012, headlined 'Wasting Time Is New Divide in Digital Era': As more children in America have gained access to the latest computing technologies, 'children in poorer families are spending considerably more time than children from more well-off families using their television and gadgets to watch shows and videos, play games and connect on social networking sites' (Richtel 2012: A1).

This divide has motivated the Federal Communication Commission to consider spending $200 million to create a new literacy corps to remediate the problem. As Dr. Dana Boyd, then a senior researcher at Microsoft and a research scholar at NYU, cautioned, 'Access alone is not a panacea. Not only does it not solve problems, it mirrors and magnifies existing problems we've been ignoring'. In noting that researchers and policy makers – while trying to close the digital access divide – failed to see how computers would be used for entertainment, Boyd said, 'We failed to account for this ahead of the curve' (Richtel 2012: A1).

Actually, some seventeen years earlier, in 1995, Postman addressed this very issue in *The End of Education*. In warning against worshipping the New God of Technology, Postman quoted a technophilic assertion by Dr. Diane Ravitch, then a former Assistant United States Commissioner of Education, on the promises of the New Cybernetic Age:

> In this world of pedagogical plenty, children and adults will be able to dial up a program on their television to learn whatever they want to learn, at their own convenience. If Little Eva cannot sleep, she can learn algebra instead.
>
> (Postman 1995)

Here is Postman's media ecological analysis of this proposal: 'In this vision, there is […] a confident and typical sense of unreality. Little Eva can't sleep, so she decides to study algebra? Where does Little Eva come from, Mars?' (1995: 39).

Postman's advice was to provide Little Eva with a serious form of technology education that makes

> technology itself an object of inquiry, so that Little Eva […] in using technologies will not be abused by them, so that Little Eva […] [will] become more interested in asking questions about the computer than in getting answers from it.
>
> (1995: 43)

Today, I am pleased to see that the media ecology approach to understanding our media and ourselves lives on in the membership of the Media Ecology Association. And I take special pleasure in seeing the names and faces of ten media ecological thinkers on the association's website. I am pleased to report that four of them have spoken at our Media Ecology Conferences (Eric Havelock, Postman, Mumford and Elizabeth Eisenstein). Marshall McLuhan, who can be called the intellectual godfather of our programme, never spoke at our conferences but did speak at earlier Postman–Weingartner Linguistics Demonstration Center Conferences at NYU in the late 1960s. And in October 1977, McLuhan was honoured by our school with the Creative Leadership in Education Award. At a special seminar held on 20 October 1977, McLuhan was asked by a student to summarize his major ideas and conclusions. He responded with some of the best advice I have ever heard for anyone who tries to think creatively and critically about anything:

> I don't like the idea of anything being finalized. This is alien to my way of exploring the situation […]. My statements are probes. I'm trying to find out what's out there. So I just push a statement out to get a response. And it's not because I want you to swallow the statement. I never have tried to say anything that was to be accepted except as a tool, as an instrument of exploration.
>
> (McLuhan 1977)

In our early explorations into media ecology, we all struggled with how to define and structure our programme. In keeping with Postman's admonition that 'our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture' (Postman 2005: 15), we encouraged our students to identify the metaphors that they thought best described what we were trying to do. Their collective judgement was that Nystrom was taking us on some type of spiritual pilgrimage to find the Holy Grail of Holistic Communication. Postman's efforts were described as an intellectual summer camp in the Catskills with the faculty as counsellors and the students as unruly campers. And I was accused of trying to run an academic boot camp with the faculty as Marine Drill Instructors and the students as the hard-pressed recruits.

When pressed by students to name the first media ecologist in history, Nystrom offered these words from the New Testament's Gospel according to St. John: 'In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. Postman countered with the Old Testament's Book of Genesis: 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. […] And God said, let there be light'. My candidate was the first Cro-Magnon human who decorated the walls of caves some 34,000 years ago. Both Nystrom and Postman claimed that their Biblical references were to God, who existed before there was anything at all, even the Big Bang of 13.7 billion years ago. This view is enshrined in the opening lines of *The Media Ecology Anthem*, composed and sung by Nystrom and a few students at the Spring 1974 Conference: 'Media Ecology almost is theology'.

Whoever was the first media ecologist, there are many candidates who could be included in our Commonwealth of Communication. All of us have our own lists. Allow me to offer three candidates for your consideration. The first is Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose aphorism that 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world' (Wittgenstein [1921] 2001: 68) which we easily changed to 'the limits of our media are the limits of our world'. The second

is that difficult but provocative thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, who cautioned us that 'convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies' ([1878] 1996: s.483) and in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, provided a concise coda for what we tried to accomplish with the Media Ecology Program: 'One repays a teacher badly if one remains nothing but a pupil' (Nietzsche 1954: 190). I am happy to report that Postman, Nystrom and I have been richly rewarded. My third candidate is the United States Marine Corps with two related messages: the first was articulated by my Senior Drill Instructor at the Marine Corps Recruit Training Base on Parris Island, South Carolina, who said: 'Rules and regulations are for the guidance of the wise and the obedience of fools'. The second was the mantra drummed into all of us undergoing Infantry Combat Training with the Fleet Marine Force at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina: 'Adapt, Improvise, Overcome'.

In trying to keep media ecology alive in spirit if not in much substance, I taught a Senior Media Seminar in Spring 2016 that attempted to answer the question: 'To what extent have American presidential campaigns become a form of reality television in 2016'. The 23 graduating seniors and I explored this question by using Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (2005) to analyse the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders for the Democratic nomination and Ted Cruz, John Kasich and Donald Trump for the Republican nomination. The students chose a reality television show to compare with a candidate from each party. For Clinton, the shows included *America's Supernanny*, *Ashley Simpson*, *Cut-Throat Kitchen*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Million Dollar Lottery*, *Naked and Afraid*, *Real Housewives* (*Beverly Hills* and *New York*), *Room Raiders*, *Shark Tank*, *Survivor* and *The Voice*. For Sanders, they were *Chopped*, *Design on a Dime* and *Undrafted NFL*. For Cruz, *Chopped*, *Design on a Dime* and *Last Comic Standing*. For Kasich, *The Amazing Race*. For Trump, *America's Next Top Model*, *The Apprentice*, *Big Brother*, *Celebrity Apprentice*, *Dance Moms*, *Duck Dynasty*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Kitchen Nightmares*, *Real Housewives* and *The 700 Club*.

Despite the range of reality shows used for comparisons with candidates, all of the 23 students concluded that the 2016 campaigns were a form of reality television, in agreement with a point made by James Poniewozik in a 3 March 2016, *New York Times* review of the Showtime offering *The Circus*: 'The 2016 election already has a reality-host front-runner and reality-TV trash-talking' (Poniewozik 2016: C3).

In exploring these results, I am keenly aware of Heraclitus's axiom that 'Nothing endures but change'. In having my students compare today's political campaigns with reality television shows, I may have been engaging in what McLuhan called 'rear-view mirror thinking' (Postman 2005: 83). Perhaps the more ecologically aware way to analyse political campaigns is to follow the path suggested by Jim Rutenberg in *The New York Times*:

> Every modern presidential election is at least in part defined by the cool new media breakthrough of its moment. In 2000, there was email […]. The 2004 campaign was the Year of the 'Web log', or blog […]. Then 2008: Facebook made it easier for campaigns to reach millions of people directly, further reducing the influence of newspapers, magazines, and television journalists. In 2012, Twitter shrank the political news cycle to minutes, if not, seconds […]. The question this year has been whether 2016 will be the 'Snapchat election', a reference to the popular and new(ish) photo-and-video-sharing service that already has some 100 million daily users and has a campaign news team of seasoned pros.
>
> (Rutenberg 2016)

When Rutenberg asked Peter Hamby, Snapchat's head of news, about these changes in both the speed of delivery and the fleeting nature of context, Hamby's response was very instructive for media ecologists: 'Snapchat's reports are ephemeral, he said, "it's about being in the moment," with this young audience, being in the flow of their lives' (Rutenberg 2016).

Any media ecologist knows that bits of information without context are meaningless, entrapping the receivers of such bits in the tyranny of the here and the now, without any critical capacity to analyse or even to recognize the realities of their environments being structured by these changing media. While I see the need for closer analyses of these changing media on American political campaigns and politicians and voters, I also note the low voting records of the millennial generation. Therefore, unless these users of Snapchat actually vote in 2016, the comparing of campaigning with reality television shows may still be valid and even useful for understanding the dynamics of media in shaping voters' conceptions and perceptions of issues, parties and candidates' images in American politics.

In 'Politics 1984: That's Entertainment', I wrote these words:

> My point here is that television has done to politics exactly what it has done to every other aspect of American life that is has embraced: television has made politics another form of entertainment, subject to the same forces that shape show business in America.
>
> (Moran 1984: 124)

It seems to me that this point still has some validity in 2016, but I do agree that we need to include in our analyses of the American political environment close scrutiny of the impacts of e-mail, the Web log (blog), Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and whatever new techniques and technology are being currently wrought by the Cyber Age. If Heraclitus's axiom that change is the only constant obtains, then I think that we media ecologists need to be constant in our focus on change as the key variable in our explorations in media ecology.

Let us strive to be wisely guided by the theories and models provided by those who inspire us, but let us not foolishly obey the letter of these theories and models while failing to follow their spirit. We need to confront the challenges of our rapidly changing media environments by continuing to adapt, to improvise and to overcome by developing and using our own critical thinking approaches to understanding our media and ourselves. Let us be neither mediaphiles nor mediaphobes, but media ecologists. The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats provided a clear difference between manipulation and communication. He said that rhetoric is the argument we have with others, while poetry is the argument we have with ourselves. In our explorations into media and communication, let us strive to be poets, not propagandists. Good luck and good thinking.

REFERENCES

Ellul, J. (1964), *The Technological Society* (trans. J. Wilkinson), New York: Vintage Books.

McLuhan, M. (1977), Creative Leadership in Education Award, Special Seminar, School of Education, New York University, 20 October.

Moran, T. P. (1984), 'Politics 1984: That's entertainment', *Etcetera*, 41, Summer issue, pp. 117–29.

Nietzsche, F. (1954), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, The Portable Nietzsche (ed., trans. Walter Kaufmann), Viking Portable Library 62, New York: The Viking Press.

——— ([1878] 1996), *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poniewozik, J. (2016), 'Review: "The circus" is reality TV for a reality-TV presidential race', *The New York Times*, 3 March.

Postman, N. (1988), 'Social science as moral theology', in N. Postman, *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technologies, and Education*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 3–19.

——— (1995), *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

——— (2005), *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary ed., New York: Penguin.

Richtel, M. (2012), 'Wasting time in new digital divide', *The New York Times*, 29 May.

Rutenberg, J. (2016), 'In this snapchat campaign news is big and then it's gone', *The New York Times*, 24 April, http://nyti.ms/1SYKL2n. Accessed 9 November 2017.

Wittgenstein, L. ([1921] 2001), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2nd ed., Routledge Classics 123, New York: Routledge.

SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Terence P. Moran is Professor of Media Ecology at New York University where he and Neil Postman founded the Graduate Program in Media Ecology. He is a co-editor of *Language in America* (1969) and the author of *Introduction to the History of Communication: Evolutions and Revolutions* (2010). He received the Emmy Award (1987) for *McSorley's New York*.

Contact: Department of Media, Culture, and Communication, Steinhardt School, New York University, 239 Greene Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10003, USA.
E-mail: Tpm1@nyu.edu