

Presidential Address

President's Address: A Time of Transition

Janet Sternberg

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. As we all know, this has been a time of transition in the United States, with Barack Obama becoming the nation's 44th president on January 20th of this year. But few people know that just 10 days later, on January 30th, the Media Ecology Association also entered a time of transition, when the Board of Directors elected the MEA's second president ever: me!

Of course, there are countless differences between being president of a country and president of a scholarly association. But the difference that strikes me the most is that, unlike Obama, I am fortunate to follow a popular and successful president, the MEA's first and foremost president, the person who accomplished so much in leading the MEA through our first decade, my dear friend and colleague, Lance Strate. Thank you, Lance. Now, as the MEA moves into our second decade, we are all lucky that Lance remains on our Board of Directors, providing an indispensable resource to help guide the Association and its rookie president through this time of transition.

To deliver my first MEA President's address here at Saint Louis University (or SLU as the locals call it) is a both an honor and a pleasure, because SLU was home to someone whose thinking is central to the media ecology intellectual tradition, a native son of the Great State of Missouri, a graduate of Saint Louis University, and one of this institution's most distinguished professors, the late Walter J. Ong of the Society of Jesus. For media ecologists, Walter Ong stands alongside Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman in what we might call the "Holy Trinity" of media ecology. Father Ong's work on literature, religion, and philosophy in general, and on orality and literacy in particular, continues to influence scholars around the world in a wide range of disciplines. So the opportunity to hold the 10th annual MEA convention here at Father Ong's house, so to speak, is a very special treat indeed, for all of us.

We owe many thanks to many people for this great treat of meeting here at SLU. At the top of the list of "thank-yous" come our convention coordinators, Paul Soukup and Sara van den Berg, along with Sara's research assistant Abigail Lambke. And Paul gets a second round of thanks for keeping track of all the finances involved in holding our annual convention, in his role as MEA Treasurer. Most certainly we thank our host, Saint Louis University, particularly the Walter Ong Center for Language and Culture, as well as the College of Arts and Sciences, the Graduate School, the Department of Communication, and the Department of English. We also thank the various SLU student workers and campus staff whose names we may not know, but whose efforts on our behalf we definitely appreciate. In addition, we express our gratitude to another co-sponsor of this convention, the Institute of General Semantics, led by none other than Lance Strate.

As we gather here in Saint Louie in the good old summertime, it is wonderful to see so many newcomers joining so many oldtimers to celebrate the MEA's 10th annual convention. In looking through the program booklet and at the badges people are wearing, I am equally delighted to see names and affiliations that are brand new to the MEA as I am to see names and faces of familiar old friends whose ties go back many years. From undergraduate students to professors emeriti, this marvelous mix of people effectively illustrates some of the key traditions of media ecology as well as of the MEA.

In both our intellectual perspectives as well as in our social interactions, media ecologists strive to be inclusive instead of exclusive, and collaborative instead of competitive. We prefer to build things together rather than to pick things apart. We are interdisciplinary through and through, a characteristic which is reflected at this convention in the rich diversity of our plenary speakers, our individual panelists, our MEA award winners, and our MEA members and officers, past and present.

I have often witnessed the amazement and joy of people's initial encounters with media ecology and with the MEA, people who tell me that for the first time ever, they find themselves among kindred spirits with whom they feel at ease. Over and over, I have heard folks describe their sense of isolation and alienation in academia until they discover what we might call the media ecology tribe. To me, media ecology and the MEA function as a sort of home for intellectual orphans, for all those thinkers and practitioners whose interests and activities tend to cross borders and transcend boundaries, usually to the chagrin of more narrow-minded and straight-laced colleagues and institutions.

Even Walter Ong represents this tradition of interdisciplinarity. According to SLU's Web site, Father Ong did his graduate work in English because, in Ong's own words, "English seemed intellectually and culturally roomier and more open than other subjects. It could encompass what they did and more—could open the way into almost anything" (Ong, n.d.). It seems likely to me that if media ecology had been recognized as a field of graduate study back then, Ong himself might have gotten a degree in media ecology.

Well, so much for the interdisciplinary nature of media ecology and media ecologists. Next, I'd like to return to the theme of my talk tonight, a time of transition for the MEA, in order to give you a sense of what changes have been taking place. But before I tell you about transitions in our Association, let us take a moment to acknowledge two longtime associates of the MEA who have passed away: Liss Jeffrey last December and Leonard Shlain this past May. Dr. Liss Jeffrey hailed most recently from Toronto, where she was legendary as a fierce advocate and defender of Marshall McLuhan in particular, as well as media ecology in general. A vibrant, enthusiastic figure, Liss seemed like a warrior spirit in the intellectual landscape of our global village. Dr. Leonard Shlain of California made significant intellectual contributions to the media ecology tradition, through his books and also the featured presentations he gave at three of our MEA conventions. A surgeon by training and profession, Leonard was not only an outstanding speaker, but he also possessed the rare

ability to use PowerPoint effectively in his memorable presentations. Both these media ecologists will be sorely missed among us, and we hope to honor and celebrate their scholarship at future MEA-sponsored events.

And now, let me tell you about what's been happening with the MEA in this time of transition. In terms of organizational structure, on our Board of Directors, besides me as President, the MEA Executive Committee now includes Lance Strate as Historian and Fernando Gutiérrez replacing me as Executive Secretary, with Thom Gencarelli continuing as Vice President and Paul Soukup as Treasurer. Others who serve on the MEA Board of Directors include Corey Anton, Stephanie Bennett, Jim Morrison, Ellen Rose, and Douglas Rushkoff, joined this year by our most recently elected Board members, Sheila Nayar and Sara van den Berg. Outgoing Board members Susan Drucker and Casey Lum deserve our warmest thanks for all they have contributed over the years, and we're lucky to have them still engaged with the MEA as active members.

I take it as a sign of the MEA's growth and expansion that our Board has become more diverse, better representing our membership overall. Of the 12 Board members for 2009, only two are among the MEA's original founders, and only three have degrees from New York University's media ecology program. The MEA Board members now hail from California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, and North Carolina, as well as New York; from Canada and Mexico, as well as the United States. And having myself been the officer in charge of keeping the MEA membership records and mailing list subscriptions, I can assure you that the MEA reaches considerably further than just the places I have named. To me, the increasing diversity among our officers, members, and list subscribers reflects a broadening of the MEA's international horizons, a desirable trend we can all encourage.

Several more organizational changes are worth noting. First, we're working on a new web site for the MEA, with a redesigned interface and improved features. Our new site will be maintained and hosted by Fernando Gutiérrez and his colleagues at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Estado de México. (These are the same folks responsible for our acclaimed eighth annual convention in 2007.) Fernando is collaborating on the new web site with Jim Morrison, who assumes the role of MEA Internet Officer. As part of these administrative and technical changes, Roxanne O'Connell steps down as Web Officer as does Paul Kelly as Webmaster, and we thank them both for their service to the Association. Likewise, as the new site becomes active in the near future, we will bid farewell with great appreciation to Thorn Communications, Inc., the company that has so generously hosted the MEA's web site until now.

A second change involves our plan to convert the MEA membership records from an offline database program to an online system that will be available to individual members on our new web site. As the former MEA record-keeper, I'm working on this project with Fernando in his new capacity as Executive Secretary. As you can tell, the MEA will be keeping Fernando and his able team at Tecnológico de Monterrey busy indeed, and we thank them all for their efforts.

One more change is that Jim Morrison will be taking over from me as manager of the MEA electronic mailing list, as part of his duties as Internet Officer. The list, by the way, has over 550 subscribers from more than 30 different domains, including subscribers from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. If you're not already subscribed to the MEA list, let me take this opportunity to suggest you give it a try. Information about the MEA list can be found in your convention program booklet on page 31.

Another transition worth mentioning is our growing relationship with the Institute of General Semantics. With Lance Strate now leading the IGS, we are developing collaborative ventures, such as co-sponsorship of symposia and other events, as well as publications featuring the work of many MEA associates. We have the IGS to thank for the complimentary copies of the *General Semantics Bulletin* and the journal *Etcetera* that were distributed along with other materials at our convention registration this year. To describe these mutually advantageous combinations of resources and efforts, I can think of no better word than "synergy." These synergistic activities are also reflected in the MEA's co-sponsorship, along with the IGS, of events such as the recent international conference on youth, media, and education held earlier this month in New York. And please take note of the Call for Papers on page 32 of your program booklet, for an international conference we are co-sponsoring with the IGS, to be held next September in New York. I am sure you will agree that collaborations like these help enrich and expand the MEA's scope and influence, for the benefit of all.

And now, as I move to the final part of my speech, let me say a few words about my own goals as MEA President. I may be new to the role of President, but my goals are nothing new: to grow the MEA, to build on the foundations laid during the MEA's first decade (thanks to Lance's leadership). In particular, I hope to continue expanding the MEA's presence internationally. We have already held one convention outside the United States, and it would be wonderful to have future conventions in other countries. Our print journal, *Explorations in Media Ecology*, fondly referred to as *EME*, already includes scholars from around the world on its editorial board, and *EME* editor Corey Anton welcomes the broadest possible range of submissions. And our mailing list routinely features exchanges among users from the many countries I listed earlier.

But we cannot expand the MEA without your help. Here are some specific things you can do. Become a paid member of the MEA if you never have before; remember to renew if your membership has lapsed. Subscribe to our mailing list, or re-subscribe if you dropped off. (Let me add that subscriptions can be tailored to a once-daily digest mode, and since 2005 the list has been spam-free.) What else can you do? Propose papers and panels for our annual convention, and also for the sessions we sponsor at other conferences like ICA, NCA, CCA, and ECA; be sure to attend our sessions at such events. Tell people about this year's MEA convention here at SLU, and plan to attend next year's MEA convention to be held at the University of Maine,

coordinated by Paul Grosswiler. (You will find the Call for Papers for MEA 2010 listing the exact dates and other details in your program booklet, on page 25.) And there's even more you can do. Suggest candidates for next year's MEA Awards (nominations are due to Lance Strate by December 2009; details appear in the program booklet on page 26). Submit articles to our journal *EME*, and ask your institution's library to subscribe to *EME* as well. Volunteer to help as a paper reviewer for MEA, not only for our journal but also for our various convention and conference activities. Consider the possibility of your institution hosting an MEA convention in the future—we are always interested in hearing from potential convention hosts. Don't forget to let Stephanie Bennett know about your own news items so she can include them here in our newsletter, *In Medias Res*; see page 32 of your program booklet for details about our newsletter. And a reminder to those of you presenting at this year's convention: be sure to submit your paper to be considered for publication in the 2009 MEA Convention *Proceedings*. Articles will be selected through a blind peer review process, and guidelines for submission appear on page 26 in your program booklet. And last but not least, please join us this Sunday morning at 10:30 for our MEA business meeting, which is open to all.

So let me conclude my first President's address by asking you to please do your share, whatever you can, to participate in and promote our MEA activities, and to support what we do. Spread the word about the MEA: send people to the our web site, show folks our publications, pass along our calls for papers, talk about us, sing about us, write about us, blog about us, even twitter about us if you like. With all our efforts combined, in an ongoing festival of synergy, building on the foundations we have laid in our first decade, I am quite sure that this time of transition will take the MEA into a fabulous second decade. Thank you all very much.

References

Ong, W. J. (n.d.). English studies is roomier. Retrieved June 1, 2009 from <http://ongnotes.slu.edu/?p=52>