

President's Address

Space, Place, and the Media Ecology Association

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With the theme of this convention being “Space, Place, and the McLuhan Legacy,” let me begin my remarks by telling you something about space and place that McLuhan and the Media Ecology Association have in common. Both McLuhan and the MEA have been, in some sense, nomads in the global village, wandering across space from one place to another, in search of people to share our ideas. In McLuhan’s case, between his birth here in Edmonton, and his death in Toronto, he lived in three countries (Canada, the UK, and the USA), four Canadian cities (Winnipeg and Windsor, in addition to Edmonton and Toronto), and four cities in the USA (Madison, St. Louis, New York, and Dallas). In the MEA’s case, between our founding in New York and this year’s gathering in Edmonton, we have held our annual convention in three countries (the USA, Mexico, and now Canada), including seven cities in the USA: New York, Hempstead, Rochester, Boston, Santa Clara, St. Louis, and Orono. And it also happens that about thirty years before the MEA was founded, way back in 1967–1968, McLuhan himself spent time in New York City, in the borough of the Bronx, at Fordham University, the MEA’s birthplace. So it is particularly appropriate that now the MEA nomads have come to McLuhan’s birthplace here in Edmonton to celebrate his legacy.

According to the dictionary, a nomad is defined as someone who wanders and roams about and who does not have any fixed residence. In this sense, McLuhan was less nomadic than the MEA, because McLuhan eventually established his long-term residence in Toronto. In contrast, the MEA is truly nomadic because our Association has never had any physical residence, only virtual homes. The first virtual home of the MEA, where we continue to reside, is the MEA’s electronic mailing list, our listserv. The second virtual home of the MEA, where we also reside, is our Web site, media-ecology.org. But in terms of physical location, the MEA has always wandered and roamed, without any literal residence, convening our group every year in a place like the University of Alberta here in Edmonton, where we are fortunate indeed to find gracious hosts and congenial colleagues to share our ideas.

But why, you may ask, is there no fixed residence for the MEA in the physical world? Well, to put it simply, the MEA is a diaspora community. A diaspora, the dictionary tells us, is a migration, movement, or dispersion of a people away from their original ancestral homelands. In the MEA’s case, our founders and earliest members were students in the Media Ecology Program created by Neil Postman and others at New York University. So the original ancestral homeland for these media ecologists was New York. As Postman’s students graduated and moved away to pursue their careers, they could always return to the Media Ecology Program in New York to renew their connections with other media ecologists. But in the mid-1990s, the New York University program began to change, gradually replacing the media ecology intellectual tradition with more mainstream theoretical perspectives. And so, there was less and less reason for media ecologists to return to New York University, and the need arose for some other kind of organization to bind together those interested in media ecology. Thus, on September 4, 1998, in New York City, at Fordham University’s campus in the Bronx, several graduates of Postman’s program founded the Media Ecology Association (Lum, 2006, p. 390).

One of our founders, Casey Lum (who could not attend this year’s convention), has described the unifying role played by the MEA in the media ecology diaspora. He writes:

[The MEA] provides a formal institutional structure independent of any university or academic degree program for the advancement of media ecology scholarship. It is a meeting place of like-minded scholars and students from diverse academic backgrounds and interests who are attracted to or intrigued by the media ecological perspectives on culture, technology, and communication. It is a manifestation of a connected diaspora of media ecologists, many of whom have dispersed widely, both institutionally and geographically. (Lum, 2006, p. 391; see also Strate, 2001, p. 4)

And so, the MEA was born in New York, without any fixed physical residence, using the MEA's electronic mailing list as our virtual home. But the MEA founders soon realized that a virtual home in cyberspace was not sufficient, and that it was necessary, in order to bind the group together, to have, at least occasionally, some type of face-to-face interaction among media ecologists gathered in the same physical location. To fulfill this function, they decided to have an annual convention, and the inaugural MEA convention was held in June 2000 at Fordham University's campus in Manhattan, the heart of New York City. Officers of the MEA are sometimes asked why we call our annual face-to-face gathering a convention instead of a conference, and our first MEA President, Lance Strate, explains it as follows:

A convention is a meeting of the membership of an organization. . . That's why in addition to speakers and programs, we also have an open business meeting—this is essential to the MEA as a democratic organization. Any other event with speakers, panels, etc., can be a conference, but the annual meeting where organizational business is conducted, reports are made, etc., is a convention. In other words, we don't just confer with each other as individuals, we convene the group as an entity. (L. Strate, personal communication, February 11, 2009)

Since that first convention back in 2000 at Fordham, the MEA officers decided always to hold our annual conventions at educational institutions where people are interested in media ecology and in hosting the MEA, instead of gathering at a big hotel in some famous city. As a result, the MEA nomads have wandered and roamed to the cities I have already named, hosted by various institutions in addition to Fordham, including New York University, Marymount Manhattan College, Hofstra University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Boston College, Tecnológico de Monterrey Campus Estado de México, Santa Clara University, Saint Louis University, and the University of Maine. This pattern the MEA has established, of choosing convention sites based on the host institution's interest rather than on its location, reminds us that space and place are not the same thing.

Though the terms space and place are often used interchangeably, these terms are not exactly synonymous. Some scholars consider place to be a more subjective social construction than space. For instance, according to media ecologists Gary Gumpert and Susan Drucker, "a place is a space with 'psychological or symbolic meaning' . . . space refers to the abstract geographical qualities of environment, which become transformed into meaningful places as people use, modify, or attribute symbolic value to specific settings" (Gumpert & Drucker, 1997, p. 2). Lance Strate tells us that "space is associated with the natural, the chaotic, the unnamed and the untamed; place is associated with the cultural and rhetorical, with order and familiarity" (Strate, 1999, p. 395). And even beyond media ecology, scholars distinguish space and place. For example, in the words of urban sociologist Lynn Lofland, "places are especially meaningful spaces, rich in associations and steeped in sentiment" (Lofland, 1998, p. 64), and further, that "the critical component of 'place' is sentiment" (1998, p. 75, n. 18).

So that is what the MEA nomads do every year when we gather at a particular physical location. We convene the Association where our presence will be meaningful, we attribute symbolic value to a specific setting, and we add that critical component of sentiment to a particular space. And in so doing, we create for the MEA each year a fresh sense of place. Maybe someday the MEA will have the financial resources for a physical residence, a building with a street address located in a city somewhere. Maybe someday another educational institution somewhere will create an official program of study to grant aca-

demic degrees in media ecology again. But in the meantime, the MEA nomadic tribe continues to wander and roam, depending on the kindness and goodwill of like-minded colleagues to offer us space at their institutions to create our annual gathering and renew our sense of place.

And what a place we have found in this setting here in McLuhan's own home town, Edmonton, the capital of the province of Alberta, known with good reason as "The Festival City." The MEA tribe is thrilled to dwell for a while among the Edmontonians and the University of Alberta's Pandas and Golden Bears, surrounded by the University's green and gold colors, which represent the emerald forests and golden fields of this bountiful region.

We owe many thanks to many people for this multi-faceted convention highlighting McLuhan's legacy in his own home town. First and foremost, we thank our convention coordinators, Marco Adria and Catherine Adams, along with their various colleagues of the Convention Secretariat. Most certainly we thank our host, the University of Alberta, particularly the Faculty of Extension and the Faculty of Education, as well other units of the University, including the Graduate Program in Communications and Technology, the City-Region Studies Centre, the Department of Secondary Education, and the Henry Marshall Tory Professor, Rob Shields. We also thank the School of Communications of Grant MacEwan University as well as McCallum Printing and CKUA Radio Alberta for co-sponsoring our convention. And we are also grateful to the various assistants, student workers, and campus staff whose names we may not know, but whose efforts on our behalf we definitely appreciate. And of course, we owe special thanks to our illustrious guest speakers and to every one of our convention participants for coming all the way to the northernmost large city on this continent to share their ideas with the MEA tribe.

So our convention has started, we MEA nomads are establishing our Edmontonian sense of place, and my next task is to give you an idea of what has been happening with the MEA since we last assembled. Alas, I must begin with a piece of sad news for our MEA tribe: the loss of Christine Nystrom, who passed away in December 2010. With a brilliant mind, rigorous scholarship, and a central role in developing media ecology theory as well as training generations of media ecologists, Chris can be called the high priestess of media ecology. But she herself was the epitome of other-directedness. She tended to avoid public attention, often sacrificing her own accomplishments so that others might shine. Nevertheless, tomorrow afternoon during a plenary session, we will put her in the spotlight as we reflect on Chris's life and work.

I turn now to review very briefly the activities of the MEA in the past year. There will be more detailed reports from various MEA officers at Sunday morning's MEA Business Meeting, which you are all encouraged to attend. First, let me offer a general thanks to all the MEA Board of Directors and our other appointed officers, each of whom I do not have time to thank here, but they are listed in the convention program booklet on page 25, and we appreciate their hard work ever so much. Overall, our progress in some areas has been excellent, but in other areas, not as much as we would like. In part, this is because we are still catching up with past commitments, such as our print journal *Explorations in Media Ecology*, and in part, because there have been some unexpected changes among the MEA's Board of Directors. For various reasons, several Board members had to step down from their MEA duties, but fortunately, we recruited others to replace them. We thank Corey Anton, Stephanie Bennett, and Adriana Braga for having served on the MEA Board, and we welcome Brian Cogan, Paul Grosswiler, and Ed Tywoniak as their replacements. I should also mention that we are calling for nominations to stand for election to the MEA Board. The nomination process is explained in a flyer included in your convention packet. The deadline for nominations is this coming August 1st, and the election will be held online a few months later.

This year, we finally conducted our annual membership drive on time, in January, the beginning of the MEA membership year, thanks to our Executive Secretary Fernando Gutiérrez and our Treasurer Paul Soukup. We thank Jim Morrison for reorganizing and streamlining the home page of our Web site, and getting more volumes of our Convention Proceedings online, and we also thank Fernando Gutiérrez's team at Tecnológico de Monterrey Campus Estado de México, which generously hosts and maintains our Web site. We eliminated the MEA's print newsletter, *In Medias Res*, replacing it with our ability to distribute information to members by email and eventually using more elaborate features still being developed for our Web site. The MEA electronic mailing list continues to attract newcomers and tie together

oldtimers. If you are not already subscribed to the MEA list, I urge you to try it. Subscriptions can be tailored to once-a-day digest mode, the list is spam-free, and information about subscribing can be found on the MEA Web site and in the convention program booklet on page 24. Subscribing to our list is one of the best ways to keep in touch with us and to stay up-to-date with MEA activities.

We continue to work on improving the production and distribution process of our journal *Explorations in Media Ecology* (fondly known as “EME”). We have made some progress in catching up with the journal’s publication schedule and correcting problems with international postal delivery. But we still face significant challenges for the journal, as we prepare to move to a different publisher, and to change editors again. We thank Peter Fallon for replacing Corey Anton as EME editor, and we also thank Paul Grosswiler who will soon take over the editor position from Peter. Our hope is that with a new publisher and fresh editorial staff, we can get the technical aspects of the journal up to the same high level of the journal’s content.

But enough about us for the moment: there will be more detailed information on our activities at Sunday morning’s business meeting. What about you? What can you do on behalf of the MEA? Become a paid member of the MEA if you never have before; remember to renew, if your membership has lapsed. Subscribe to our email list, or re-subscribe if you dropped off. Propose papers and panels for our annual conventions, and also for the sessions we sponsor at other conferences, and be sure to attend our sessions at such events. Tell people about this year’s MEA convention here in Edmonton, and plan to attend future MEA conventions as well. Suggest candidates for next year’s MEA Awards—details about nominations appear in the program booklet on page 22. Submit contributions to our journal EME, and ask your institution’s library to subscribe to EME as well. Volunteer to help as a paper reviewer for the journal and for the MEA convention, as well as to review submissions for MEA-sponsored sessions at other conferences. Consider the possibility of your institution hosting an MEA convention in the future; we are always interested in talking with potential convention hosts, and our Call for Hosts and Convention Planning Manual are available on the MEA Web site. And a reminder to those of you presenting here at this year’s convention: be sure to submit your paper to be considered for publication in the 2011 MEA Convention Proceedings. Articles will be selected through a blind peer review process, and guidelines for submissions appear on page 24 of the program booklet.

And now, as I move towards the end of my speech, let me come back to the theme of space and place. As we can plainly see through this year’s convention activities, there can be tremendous importance and benefit in visiting someone’s birthplace and celebrating a person’s ancestral roots. This year, the MEA nomads have come to pay tribute to Marshall McLuhan’s birthplace here in Edmonton as well as to salute McLuhan’s legacy to the global village. Next year, I am delighted to announce that we will return to the MEA’s birthplace to celebrate our own roots. In 2012, we will gather again in New York City, our first time back since 2005. We are extremely fortunate and pleased that Manhattan College, in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, will host the MEA’s thirteenth annual convention. Our convention coordinator for MEA 2012 at Manhattan College is none other than MEA Vice President Thom Gencarelli. Unfortunately, Thom was unable to attend this year’s convention, but he has prepared the Call for Papers for MEA 2012, which appears on page 23 of the program booklet. You will see that Thom has chosen for next year’s assembly a wonderful theme: “The Crossroads of the Word.” We hope you will carefully consider the possibility of joining us in Riverdale as we return to the MEA’s home town.

I would like to close my remarks tonight by suggesting another metaphor, one which comes to us from the literary world. I feel sure that a citizen of the global village like Marshall McLuhan would not mind at all if I bring to your attention a metaphor from the American author Ernest Hemingway. In describing the time he spent living in Paris during the 1920s, Hemingway is reported to have said to a colleague the following statement, which became the basis for the title of Hemingway’s posthumous memoirs: “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast” (as cited in Hotchner, 1955/2005, p. 57). Well, the way I see it, we can apply this same metaphor both to McLuhan and to the MEA. If you are lucky enough to have encountered McLuhan’s legacy, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, his legacy stays with you, for McLuhan is a moveable feast. And if you are lucky enough to have participated in one

or another of the MEA's activities, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, media ecology stays with you, for the MEA too is a moveable feast. So I hope that many of you here will be moved, both figuratively and literally, to join us back in our home town, New York, in June 2012, when the MEA nomadic tribe gathers again for our annual moveable feast. I can promise you that, as always, McLuhan's legacy will be there with us too. Thank you very much.

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