

The Flight of MinErvA's Owl

President's Address Delivered at the Second Media Ecology Association Convention
New York University
June 16, 2001

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I TAKE THE TITLE of my address from one of the first media ecology theorists, the Canadian political economist Harold Innis (1951). Innis in turn took the theme of Minerva's owl from the German philosopher Hegel. My focus is not so much on Hegel's avian philosophy, however, as it is on Innis's media ornithology.

For most of us, the first sighting of Minerva's owl comes by way of the collection of short pieces by Innis titled *The Bias of Communication*. Originally published in 1951, this book is considered one of the foundational works in the media ecology tradition. Marshall McLuhan (1964) wrote an introduction to the book where he confesses:

I am pleased to think of my own book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (University of Toronto Press, 1962) as a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the psychic and social consequences, first of writing, and then of printing. Flattered by the attention that Innis had directed to some work of mine, I turned for the first time to his work. It was my good fortune to begin with the first essay in this book: "Minerva's Owl." How exciting it was to encounter a writer whose every phrase invited prolonged meditation and exploration. (p. ix)

Like McLuhan, I found the call of Minerva's owl compelling, and haunting, and when the time came to choose a theme for this address, this rare bird came to mind. Having settled on this theme, I was delighted to find, upon reviewing the essay, that it had originated as the 1947 Presidential Address given by Innis to the Royal Society of Canada. I in no way mean to imply that what I have to say approaches the significance of that lecture. But I find it gratifying to realize that, in some small way I am reenacting that archetypal moment, and for the duration of my speech I would ask you to think of yourselves as the Royal Society of Media Ecologists.

According to Judith Stamps (1995), Innis was not, in fact, a very successful speaker; she writes that when "scholars from England and Canada were treated for the first time to one of his Hegelian speculations—a discourse on the owl of Minerva . . . Innis's audience dwindled quickly and sadly to a handful of listeners" (p. 42). So I ask that you do not take the idea of reenactment too literally, and refrain from walking out, if for no other reason, than to avenge Innis's honor.

Looking closely at the phrase "Minerva's Owl," another happy coincidence presented itself to me: The name "Minerva" begins with an M, has an E in the middle, and ends with an A. This led me to indulge in a bit of postmodern media orthography in the title of my address as it is printed in your programs, capitalizing the MEA within MinErvA. I take this as a sign, indicating that when Innis delivered his address over thirty years ago, it contained within it the germ of the idea of our association. You might say that the MEA was a *media virus*, to use Douglas

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Rushkoff's (1994) phrase, originally communicated by Innis. But given that most of Innis's audience walked out on him that day, it seems that Minerva's owl laid an egg, and we are what was hatched from it.

IN ANY EVENT, it is clear that there is a connection between the MEA and the Roman goddess Minerva, known to the Greeks as Athena. As you may recall, Minerva sprang forth from the mind of Jupiter, fully grown and wearing the armor of a male warrior. In this sense, Minerva represents thought, or more to the point, *is* thought—thought externalized, contextualized, and concrete. She is the product of primary orality, to use Walter Ong's (1982) well-known phrase, and perhaps the product of the bicameral mind, as posited by Julian Jaynes (1976). She is the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, of reason and strategy. Minerva does not represent abstract intellect, internalized thought, or pure mind as we would understand it. Rather, she is the goddess of applied thinking, of the practical and ornamental arts. She is the patron of traditionally masculine activities such as defensive warfare, farming, and navigation, and of traditionally feminine arts such as spinning, weaving, and needlework. As Camille Paglia (1990) explains:

Athena is *techne* ("art, skill") rather than *nous* ("mind"). . . . She appears in more disguises and crosses sexual borderlines more often than any other Greek god because she symbolizes the resourceful, adaptive mind, the ability to invent, plan, conspire, cope, and survive. The mind as *techne*, pragmatic design, was hermaphroditic for the ancients. (p. 85)

Like Innis, Lewis Mumford (1934, 1967, 1970) is considered one of media ecology's progenitors, and a critic of machine technology and ideology. He holds up the ancient notion of *techne* as an alternative, a form of technology that is relatively organic and ecological, not to mention aesthetic. It seems that Minerva was Mumford's patron, too, both for his scholarship on technics, and his pioneering work in urban studies. Edith Hamilton (1942) says of Minerva: "She was pre-eminently the Goddess of the City, the protector of civilized life, of handicrafts and agriculture; the inventor of the bridle, who first tamed horses for men to use" (p. 29). Minerva's city was, of course, Athens, named for her as Athena. Athens has long served as a symbol of a society ruled by reason, wherein scholarship and the arts are able to thrive; it is the original habitat of Minerva's owl. Athens also gave rise to the first extended studies in media ecology, specifically the documents known as Plato's *Phaedrus* and his *Seventh Letter* (1973).

According to myth, Minerva is the only member of the pantheon to aid her fellow intellectual, Prometheus, in his quest for fire. She also plays a significant role in the *Odyssey*, assisting and protecting Ulysses in his efforts to return to Ithaca, and reclaim his wife and household. Of this, allow me to quote Paglia (1990) one more time:

Both Odysseus and Penelope are tricksters and master strategists. Life for him is a performance art. . . . Homeric mind is ingenuity, practical intelligence. There is no Rodin-like deep thinking, no mathematical or philosophical speculation. That comes much later in history. Odysseus thinks with his hands. He is athlete, gambler, engineer. Athena rules technological man. (p. 87)

I cannot resist noting the important role that the figure of Ulysses played for the twentieth century novelist James Joyce, especially given that today is Bloomsday. Nor is it possible to ig-

nore the influence of Joyce on McLuhan, the great trickster figure of media ecology. Can we deny that Minerva rules Joyce and McLuhan, as well as Mumford and Innis?

The owl, itself a symbol of wisdom and knowledge, is Minerva's emblem and sign. Minerva's owl, in turn, is the animal totem of the Media Ecology Association, for media ecology is concerned with knowledge about knowledge, with the study of our ways of knowing. For Innis (1951), this includes an understanding of how different media foster or undermine monopolies of knowledge. For Ong (1967, 1981), it includes an understanding of the noetic differences between hearing and vision, and oral and literate modes of communication. For Postman (1985), it includes an understanding of media epistemology. And for Peter Drucker (1969, 1993), it includes an understanding of how twentieth century technologies turned us into a knowledge society, governed by a knowledge economy, run by knowledge workers.

Knowledge is not an object or a thing. Ong (1981) tells us, "You know what you can recall" (p. 33). Knowledge is remembering. It is speaking and listening. It is reading and writing. It is teaching and learning. Knowledge is communication, interaction, and intercourse, in all of its double entendre. It is a verb, rather than a noun. It is an activity, sometimes subversive, sometimes conserving. Knowledge is a practice, one that mutates and evolves in response to changing media environments. Minerva's owl is a moving target.

INNIS'S 1947 ADDRESS was titled "Minerva's Owl." Mine is titled "The Flight of Minerva's Owl," because I want to emphasize that this bird is not only an embodiment, but also a vehicle of knowledge. We use flight as a metaphor for thought, we speak of winged words, and we view ideas as uplifting. "The Flight of Minerva's Owl" suggests that knowledge flies, but it also has another meaning, that knowledge flees. And this is the haunting aspect of Innis's owl. Allow me to read to you a few excerpts from his 1947 address. He opens with the quotation, "Minerva's owl begins its flight only in the gathering dusk . . ." and then goes on to say:

Hegel wrote in reference to the crystallization of culture achieved in major classical writings in the period that saw the decline and fall of Grecian civilization. The richness of that culture, its uniqueness, and its influence on the history of the West suggest that the flight began not only for the dusk of Grecian civilization but also for the civilization of the West. (Innis, 1951, p. 3)

A little later he returns to this theme and suggests:

With a weakening of protection of organized force, scholars put forth greater efforts and in a sense the flowering of the culture comes before its collapse. Minerva's owl begins its flight in the gathering dusk not only from classical Greece but in turn from Alexandria, from Rome, from Constantinople, from the republican cities of Italy, from France, from Holland, and from Germany. (p. 5)

And towards the end of his address, Innis notes that

Since its flight from Constantinople Minerva's owl has found a resting-place only at brief intervals in the West. It has flown from Italy to France, the Netherlands, Germany, and after the French Revolution back to France and England and finally

to the United States. These hurried and uncertain flights have left it little energy and have left it open to attack from numerous enemies. (p. 30)

Clearly, Minerva's owl is a nervous owl, and rightly so. I think Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) would say that it is an owl with *no sense of place*. Worse yet, is an endangered species. It has found nesting places in places like Toronto, St. Louis, and here in New York, but all too often night falls, and the owl must flee. The niches it has found in institutions of higher learning have always been tenuous, dependent on a handful of faculty, and the kindness of strange administrators. Sustenance is sometimes hard to come by, and predators abound. Universities are famous for gathering dusk, and our bird rarely rests easy in such ecosystems.

Perhaps the Media Ecology Association is itself the flowering of culture that comes before its collapse, readying it for transport and ensuring its survival over time. Certainly, the MEA transcends the limitations of specific institutions, and fosters the formation of a diaspora community, a Global Network Of Media Ecologists (GNOME).

But as media ecologists, we are also conservationists. The fundamental mission of the Media Ecology Association is to protect our owl's natural habitat, and create sustainable environments. And we must begin by making the MEA a safe nesting ground for our species. Many of us have worked long and hard to make it happen, and we have come a long way over a short period of time. But there is no guarantee that the MEA will still be here a few years from now, there is no guarantee that this ecosystem will achieve a stable homeostasis. Not unless the call of Minerva's owl is a call to action.

LET ME SIMPLY impress upon you the three *P*'s that will make possible our preservation. First, pay your dues. Innis was an economist as well as ecologist, and he would undoubtedly remind us that money is the lifeblood of organizations. Second, proselytize. Spread the word, bring in new members—we need their dues, too, and their help, and their company. Third, participate. We need your presence and your assistance in making our conventions, programs, publications, and discussion list a success, and in making our organization work.

As the MEA is a young organization, much of our activity is devoted to institution-building. Consequently, much of our energy is presently turned inward. At last year's convention, the membership approved the association's constitution. This year, we seek to amend it. I urge you to review the proposals, come to the business meeting tomorrow morning to help us form a less imperfect union. I want to thank our Boards of Directors and Advisors, and especially James Carey, Gary Gumpert, Susan Drucker, Neil Postman, Christine Nystrom, Paul Levinson, and Joshua Meyrowitz, for providing us with an improved organizational model. And I want to acknowledge Stephanie Gibson and Thom Gencarelli for their work on the Constitution Committee. I also want to applaud Thom Gencarelli for his successful efforts in registering the MEA as a nonprofit corporation.

Over the past year we began to establish a committee structure, and over the next year we will expand upon it, and will be looking for volunteers. This will include the existing website committee, which is currently led by James Morrison. We will also be establishing a membership committee, and a financial committee, as well as reconstituting our awards and convention committees. Speaking of conventions, we are open to discussion with potential hosts for future MEA meetings.

Our annual conventions offer an intense opportunity for intellectual intercourse, and thereby constitute the mating season for Minerva's owl. This year's meeting would not be possible with-

out the hard work of our convention coordinator, Janet Sternberg, and I want to thank her and all of the other volunteers who have worked so hard to make this event a success. I also want to acknowledge the sponsorship of New York University's Department of Culture and Communication, and thank Neil Postman for his support. I also want to thank those individuals who helped to fund this convention, including Neil Kleinman and Stephanie Gibson of the University of Baltimore, David Linton of Marymount Manhattan College, George Back of Hofstra University, Dorilona Rose of MIT Press, Paul Thaler of Mercy College, and Barbara Bernstein of Hampton Press.

Publications are an important way in which organizations like ours feather their nests. I want to express our gratitude to Ray Gozzi, Jr. for taking over editorship of the MEA newsletter, *In Medias Res*, and doing such a wonderful job on his first issue. Mark Lipton and Janet Sternberg have been working hard on the *Proceedings* of last year's inaugural MEA convention, which will be published on our website in the near future, and Donna Flayhan has agreed to edit the 2001 proceedings—thank you Mark, Janet, and Donna. Journals are a traditional medium of scholarly intercourse, and last year MEA members received a copy of a special issue of *The New Jersey Journal of Communication* on the intellectual roots of media ecology, edited by Casey Lum (2000). Thanks go to Casey, to the journal's regular editor, Gary Radford, and to the New Jersey Communication Association. This year, members will receive a copy of *The Speech Communication Annual*, the official journal of the New York State Communication Association, which I have edited (Strate, 2000). And next year, we will have our own Media Ecology Association journal, Minerva willing.

Not all of our efforts have been of a purely internal nature. As a scholarly association, we interact with other societies, such as the New York State Communication Association and the New Jersey Communication Association. Thanks to the efforts of Casey Lum, we have become an affiliate of the National Communication Association and sponsored several outstanding sessions at last year's NCA convention. And this year's program promises to be even more impressive. Also, thanks to the sponsorship of Susan Drucker, we have become an affiliate of the Eastern Communication Association, and are currently considering programs for next April's ECA meeting here in New York City. We will also be applying for affiliate status to the International Communication Association, and are looking for MEA members interested in working with ICA. And we are generally open to affiliation with other organizations in any field or discipline that connects with our own. I invite interested MEA members to come forward, and discuss and work with our Executive Committee in this regard.

At present, it is only natural that the MEA look to its relations with others of its own kind. Even for Minerva's owl, it is true that birds of a feather flock together. In this way, we strengthen the species for the challenges ahead. And, after all, philosophical speculation is exhilarating, and pure knowledge is a pleasure we ought to be able to indulge in without guilt or shame.

BUT WE should keep in mind that Minerva favors a balance between theory and practice, thought and application. For example, media ecology has long been concerned with educational institutions, pedagogical methods, and teaching as an essential activity. Consider the fact that Innis was Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto. That his most devoted follower, James Carey, was the Dean of the College of Communications in the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (before he wised up and moved east to Columbia University). And that McLuhan's first graduate student, Donald Theall, was President of Ontario's Trent University. Among the major players in the educational reform movement of

the sixties were media ecologists like Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, and Ivan Illich. And it was here at New York University that Postman, with Christine Nystrom and Terence Moran, launched the media ecology program within NYU's School of Education.

With this history, I think it reasonable to expect that the MEA should be prepared to address issues related to teaching and schooling. I single out education, but there are many more arenas within which media ecologists have been involved in the past, and the MEA might play a role in the future, including politics, government, the courts, urban planning, religion, the arts, business, and of course the media industries and the natural environment.

Henry Perkinson was a Professor of Education here at NYU who turned to media ecology towards the end of his career. He argues that media of communication have facilitated human progress by aiding us in the accumulation of knowledge, and that as new media are introduced, they provide us with new ways of encoding our culture and knowing our world, and therefore entirely new forms of knowledge (Perkinson 1991, 1995, 1996). Along the same lines, I would suggest to you that the Media Ecology Association is a means by which we can make things better, improve our understanding of the world, and thereby improve the world itself. Through the MEA, we can make sure that the next time Minerva's owl begins its flight, it is not to retreat and seek refuge, it is to explore new heights and claim new territory.

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