What's a Nice Guy Like You Doing in a Place Like This? The Pivotal Role of Ethnography in the Evolution of Media Ecological Theory

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SOME years ago, a good friend of mine who was frequently involved with one political issue or another, used to wear a button on his jacket that read: "The trouble with Leninists is they all want to be Lenin." The image of the bearded Lenin, standing on a platform and extolling the masses to rise up against their oppression, is a most appealing one. On the one hand, it calls to the angels in us that demand justice and freedom for all and, on the other, it is the voice of those demons that crave adulation and power.

I begin here because it seems to me that intellectual revolutions, no less than social and political ones, are commonly crystallized in the form of a figure that quickly assumes a platform much bigger than life. Marshall McLuhan is another such figure. We sometimes forget that he was a man made of flesh and blood, riddled with foibles and folly, distained and ridiculed by many who now carry his banner. More importantly, for the purposes of my discussion today, what is often overlooked is the degree to which these monumental figures stand on a stage that was built by thousands of hands whose labor is underplayed and forgotten. Neil Postman, another figure who has become larger than life, was fond of reminding his students that we are all dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. Unfortunately for many Leninists, as well as for many McLuhanists, there is a tendency to imagine ourselves as giants standing on the shoulders of dwarfs. And this, of course, is not a good thing. While the jury is still out on the future of media ecology, we've all seen what has happened to the glorious Bolshevik Revolution that began with such promise and ended with such despair. And so today, at the outset of my talk, I would like to extend this observation and propose my own lapel button "The trouble with McLuhanists is they all want to be McLuhan."

In my paper, I would like to emphasize that media ecology—perhaps more than any other discipline—is a team sport. While we do have an impressive stable of superstars—Mumford, McLuhan, Postman and Ong come immediately to mind—the nature of our inquiry and our method of procedure are inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary. I do not believe there is any garden we have not pilfered, any refrigerator we have not raided, any section of the library where we don't feel at home. In the specialized and puritanical world of academia, we are not only promiscuous but proud of it. We esteem our roles as generalists and, as such, our penchant for crossing borders requires us to work with, translate and integrate a vast array of ideas into a coordinated whole.

Following on this observation, I wish to underscore the importance of ethnography in contributing to the foundations and evolution of media ecology. Not only was much of McLuhan's stage built upon the fieldwork of Edmund Carpenter, Dorothy Lee, and other anthropologists, but many of the brilliant insights outlined by Walter Ong are derived from the ethnographic research of Milman Parry, Alfred Lord, Jack Goody, Levi Strauss and others.

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Moreover, the common sense and folk wisdom that we find so pronounced and appealing in the work of Neil Postman is largely the reflection of a neighborhood intellectual who always lived close to his community, even writing in community settings, and who could talk as easily with a busboy at a diner as he could with the likes of Lewis Mumford and Erik Havelock. In other words, the great media ecologists have always understood that the nature of our scholarship requires us to discourse with others who are different, frequently not as well educated, perhaps not even literate, but who possess a wealth of knowledge and a quality of experience we value and respect. Once again, we must acknowledge that we are but dwarfs on the shoulders of giants.

From this perspective, the value of conducting ethnographic research in Latin America, and in my case in Brazil and in Chile, is enormous. Here one finds a communication environment where a robust oral culture still competes with electronic media for dominance and prestige. In the words of the Argentine scholar Garcia Canclini, "Latin America is the place where traditions haven't left and modernization is still arriving" (p. 13). It's not unusual, for example, to find small towns in the interior of Brazil where the area around the central plaza exhibits all the familiar trappings of the modern world—automobiles, televisions, bright lights, loud music, and Coca Cola—while a walk of but a few blocks in any direction will bring you to a dirt road, horses, chickens and cows, stray dogs, hand tools, and humble shacks lit by candlelight.

In my book, *Mediating the Muse,* I build my investigation of music, technology and cultural change around an ethnographic study conducted in small town in the interior of Brazil known as Abadiânia. The purpose of the ethnography was to provide a thick description of the historic transition from orality to electronic media as it was recalled and experienced by members of the community. Electrification in Abadiânia at the time of my study was a relatively recent phenomenon, arriving in the early 1960s and, as of 1980, only 30% of the rural homes were serviced by electrical current. This particular town, therefore, provided an excellent opportunity to study the transition from an oral media environment to an electronic one.

The findings of my study revealed a much deeper relationship between music, technology and cultural practice than is normally considered or seriously evaluated. While modern mediated forms opened the town to a wider diversity of musical ideas, it also eliminated many of the practices that had glued the community together and gave it a share sense of meaning. To note one prominent example, we need only look at the diminished stature of the oral musician. Within the oral music environment, there was ample room and respect for the amateur musician. Since the mechanical reproduction of music didn't exist and the specialized professional musician wasn't normally affordable or available, the local amateur musician became the muse who inspired all events, actions, and locations where music was called for.

With the arrival of electronic technology, the amateur musician finds himself in a difficult position. He cannot possibly keep up with the ever changing and ever expanding repertoire of music promoted on radio, TV, cassette and CD—much of it, of course, in English—nor can his performance on a well worn country guitar compete successfully with the polished productions of a modern day recording studio.

All of this comes as no great surprise because we experienced something very similar in the United States several decades ago. But it is instructive to see it all over again in a different context, with a different content, from a media ecological perspective and to experience it personally. The extinguishing oral music culture flips into an art form now that it is studied by ethnomusicologists who treat it like a museum artifact to be preserved in a pristine form now that it no longer performs a functional role within the modern world of electronic technology. At the same time, the newly emergent electronic music environment retrieves something unexpected of

the past. I found it interesting, for example, that many of the old timers complained how secularized and unbridled the feast of St. John was becoming when, the feast itself was an attempt by the Church several centuries ago to Christianize and restrain the exuberant midsummer celebrations of pagan Europe. In other words, the intensity, sexuality, and ecstasy of pre-Christian pagan music re-emerge triumphant after centuries of Christian repression.

But at same time we celebrate the pent up release of Dionysian energy, we must introduce the question that Neil Postman urged his students and readers to ask, "What is undone by this technological transformation?" "What are its disadvantages as well as its advantages?" "What individuals, what groups, what classes, what institutions will benefit and who will lose out?"

It seems to me clear enough that the community is losing a form that helped to bond it together in a coherent way. The collective musical repertoire of the community begins to evaporate through neglect and with it the solidarity that group singing enhances. Moreover, music becomes less something that one produces as part of his or her heritage and more something that one consumes. The new electrically sustained musical culture also encourages fashion, a sharp division of generations, and commercialism to the max as television becomes a huge part of the equation.

Before closing, I should point out what I believe to be some of the shortcomings of my study. First of all, it can be accused of painting a nostalgic portrait of disappearing orality. Certainly my conclusions seem to favor the oral music environment over the emergent electronic one even when I point out some of the distinct advantages of the latter. But is it strictly nostalgic to lament the passing of actual participation in the creation of culture and the performance of song? Lewis Mumford (1952), who dedicated much of his life to the study of such questions, offered this insightful remark over a half century ago in the days long before the massive introduction of stereos, I-pods, and MTV: "the very growth of mechanical facilities has given people a false ideal of technical perfectionism so that unless they can compete with the products of the machine or with those whose professional training qualifies them for such a public appearance, they are all too ready to take a back seat" (pp. 6-7). It would seem, therefore, that the perplexing result is that even those of us who swear a devotion to music often become strangely silent before polished music boxes of perfect sound that only require we push buttons, flip switches and quietly listen.

A second objection to my study, I take more seriously. Why should people, especially those in another culture, open their doors and their lives to me, an outsider? It was precisely this objection that a man raised during my very first ethnographic study some 30 years ago. While collecting interviews in a shantytown in the Northeast of Brazil, a man I had approached asked me sharply but very honestly, "why should I participate in your study? A few months from now, you'll be gone and I'll still be here in this slum." And it was true: why should he or anyone else participate in my study? Over the years, the man's words have haunted me and I have never been able to respond to his objection in a satisfactory way. True, I approach my subjects and their community with respect. True, I do regard their experience as something valuable, as something that should be affirmed, recorded, documented and passed on. True, I try to make my presence useful to the local community by providing services that may be needed. But is this sufficient? Is the trade an equal one? And, if not, what can I do to make it more so?

A third shortcoming I find with my study is perhaps the most serious of all. In places like Brazil and throughout Latin America, where the richness of orality has not yet surrendered to literacy or electronic media, the ethnographer of media ecology enters a world and lives a culture that the theorist only reads about. As someone drawn to ethnography and the concrete world of

lived experience, however, I often find it difficult to abstract and theorize based upon the descriptions that I record. As a media ecologist, I am well aware of distinctions between orality, literacy and electronic media environments but I always remain with the doubt that there's much more buried in them there hills than I was able to bring to the surface. I would encourage other media ecologists, therefore, especially those who are of a more theoretical bent to continue to look at ethnographies, as did McLuhan and Ong, and to draw out some of implications that myopic ethnographers like myself may have simply overlooked.

But in the end, what more can I say? I'm only a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant. And in my case, the giant is a pyramid that not only includes Postman, McLuhan and Ong but a very small town in the middle of a very big country called Brazil. Muito obrigado.