

## **In Other Words: Review of Introduction to Media Ecology, Paolo Granata (2021)**

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## **In Other Words: Review of *Introduction to Media Ecology*, Paolo Granata (2021)**

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As a field of study, Media Ecology has a distinguished cast of actors and contributors stretching back at least to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's cross-disciplinary approach stitches together insights from communications, media, pop culture, technology, computing, social networking, anthropology, literature, linguistics, history, art, sociology, psychology, economics, biology, neuroscience and other fields of inquiry. All these fields of study and activity must communicate their hypotheses, discoveries, and persuasive arguments and all need to consider how the medium is the message, and how we are enmeshed in mediated environments.

Keeping track of all the threads—what Donna Haraway would call “string games”—and holding those threads in place takes study, intellectual dexterity, and receptivity. I've read many media ecology texts since the early 1970s as a TA at Rutgers (Postman and McLuhan), and while writing curriculum for a Media Studies degree at Vancouver Island University in the 1990s and 2000s. As a member of the MEA, I try to keep current and have benefitted by learning from champions in the field such as Paolo Granata.

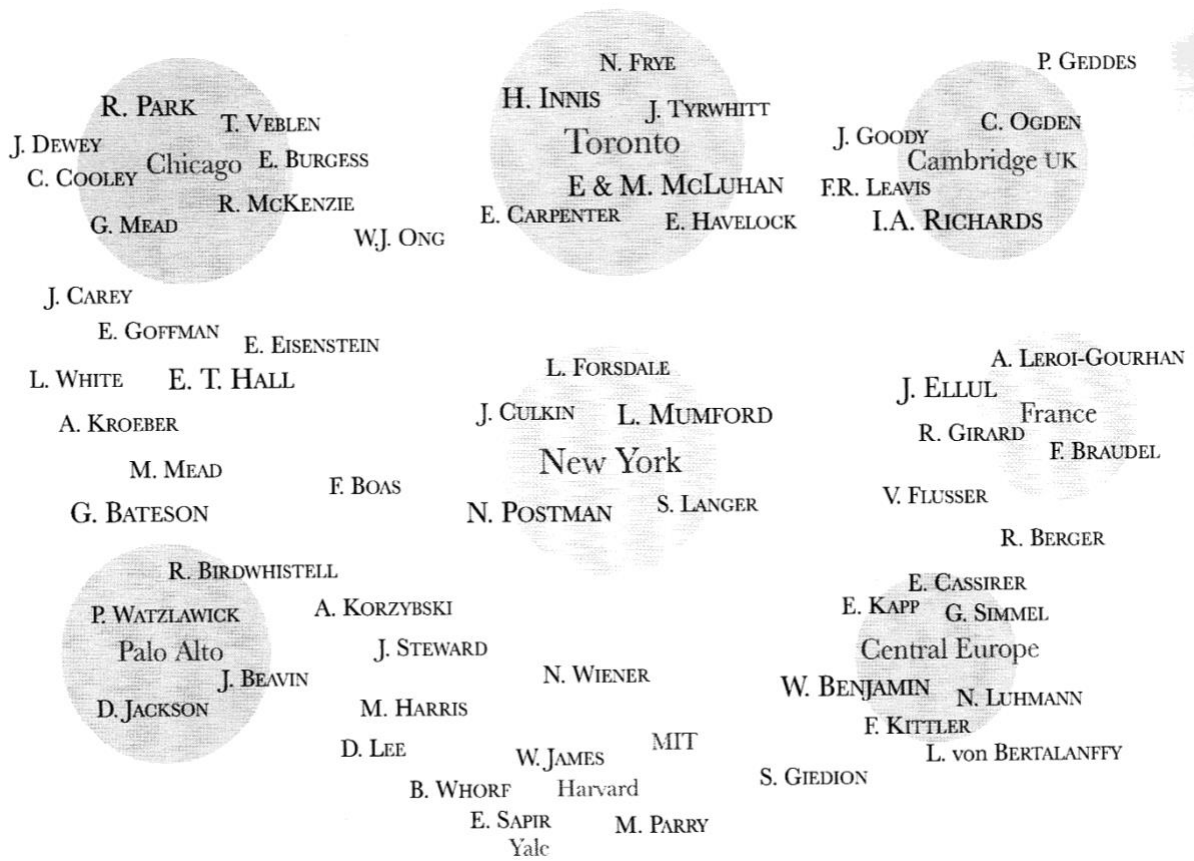
As former Program Curator for the McLuhan Center for Culture and Technology at University of Toronto, and founder of the Media Ethics Lab, Paolo Granata is one of those champions who brings comprehensive understanding to his *Introduction to Media Ecology*. He is student, teacher, and visionary with ethical compass. As he explains in his book, he wants “to raise public awareness about the role that Universities should play in the 21st century; to provide an environment of social cohesion; to create the conditions for sustainable development; and to strengthen participation in cultural life.” He fulfils these goals in this fine introduction to a field most of us love. His approach is orderly, comprehensive (given the limitations of textual space), generous, enthusiastic, astute. Granata makes a wide-ranging and stimulating contribution to our understanding of Media Ecology and its “schools,” and provides a useful map of that territory. As Alfred Korzibsky advised us, Granata is fully aware that the map is not the territory.

Like many other champions of the field, Granata is always the teacher. He frequently uses the expression “In other words” to reframe concepts, make them more accessible to a variety of readers.

Whether we want [to] accept it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, we act and live within the media; media really are our environment. That doesn't mean that our life is defined by the media, rather it constantly interacts with and is transformed by them in a process of mutual influence. In other words, the media are our habits

and habitat, the infrastructure of that invisible and complex network that is the human ecosystem. (p.8)

You will find “In other words” repeated almost as a catechism in this book. (I am tempted to count the number of repetitions!) The phrase, in plain language, identifies its author as a person committed to education, clarity, understanding and sharing. It also explains what many of us do: write about other people’s writing, speaking, and thinking “in other words.” After all, our community is a meshwork of influence and insight.



### Granata’s Network of Schools and Champions

Granata’s map of the territory illustrates his commitment to a diversity of perspectives, opinions, and approaches:

In fact, a rigorously interdisciplinary approach is one of the distinctive features of media ecology as a field of study. This book is an attempt to unify the contributions by a varied group of thinkers who effectively reshaped and revitalized the traditional fields of knowledge by recognizing original connections between seemingly unrelated disciplinary fields and thus established an open field of study that

defies disciplinary boundaries. (p.15)

I share this appreciation for the “interdisciplinary approach,” and, in my own practice, often feel that defying disciplinary boundaries is not as easy as it sounds. It takes time, study, working through and with, curiosity, openness to new discoveries. I know that Granata has taken this path. Rather than defying disciplinary boundaries, maybe our challenge is to expand those boundaries while still playing by the rules of the game. Media Ecology offers a *rapprochement*, a reconciliation of humanities and science, art and technology and proves the disciplinary boundaries to be porous. Human understanding is a leaky proposition.

As a student of improvisation, I have learned that improvising for performance takes place within a matrix of constraints, or protocols. Keith Sawyer’s *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (2017) provides excellent insights on this question of improvisation within collaboration. If you have ever played a team sport, or a musical instrument with other musicians, you will know what this flow state feels like. Experiencing flow is elusive and requires p(l)aying attention. This is what we are doing in Media Ecology: collaborating to achieve group genius. In other words, Granata wants us to collaborate using champions of the game for inspiration. His enthusiasm is contagious.

In addition to defining media ecology (chapter 1) and updating these observations in the final chapter (Media Ecology Today), Granata organizes his history into “schools” of thought and collaboration: New York, Toronto, Chicago, Cambridge, Palo Alto, Harvard, MIT and Central Europe. There are numerous outliers, from Bateson to Giedion, and a helpful survey of relative newcomers in the final chapter. “Media Ecology Today” could use a separate text to identify those who follow in the wake of Mumford, Innis, the McLuhans, Postman, Carpenter, Havelock, Hall, Ong, Goffman, Ellul, and Benjamin. Granata generously lays out some of the force fields of current influence. In other words, he recommends so much rigorous and creative work--with differences--for us to explore as a collective. I imagine his students catching fire. One of the insights I realized from reading Granata’s book is the general focus of Media Ecology on human culture. Mediated environments are created by and for humans, the symbol-making species. Without symbols, metaphors, analogies, tropes and figures, we would have no cave art, ceremonial ritual, language, orality, literacy, cybernetics, AI, self-reflection or auto-poiesis, self-making. This human-centered pre-occupation may be a shortcoming of the field to date. Reading Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* encourages me in this observation when she argues for deeper awareness of chthonic beings who live “in, under or beneath the earth”—the rest of the planet, living and material, besides humans.

Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I image chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. ...They also demonstrate and perform consequences. Chthonic ones are not safe; they have no truck with ideologues; they belong to no one.... No wonder the world’s great monotheisms in both religious and secular guises have tried again and again to exterminate the chthonic ones.  
(p. 2)

Haraway wants us to pay attention to other species, other physical environments because we have co-evolved; we are inter-dependent, enmeshed in a network of kinships. Perhaps our new media explorations could expand our webs of kinship and ecological concern beyond our

human preoccupations.

I believe Granata would consider this a viable opportunity for Media Ecology investigation. As an ethicist, he wants to do the right thing--his book is evidence of that inclination. "This is not just a matter of getting to know or learn how to use these media. It means, instead, learning how to live with and within those media.... Living within the media with this kind of awareness means recognizing the role-playing game within which we are inevitably called to participate" (p. 8-9). As with all sports, we play within the rules of the game. We have referees. We can improvise within the rules and boundaries of play. "But, once the game is on, all we can do is play both *with* the media and *within* the media" (p. 9). In other words, Granata plays in the liminal zones--betwixt and between, inside and outside--on the threshold of media ecology innovation.

Granata begins with Neil Postman's definition of media ecology as the study that "looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling and value" (p. 11; Postman, N. (1970), *The Reformed English Curriculum*, p. 161). Note the telling emphasis on "human" perception.

The media environment is a system of interconnected elements where the form and specific features of each media reconnect with the plurality of processes that take place in the larger environment, becoming networks of mutual relations and dependencies. (p. 13)

Practically, most of the emphasis in the field is on human enterprise and psychology, not so much on the chthonic substrate of the human condition. If we paid less attention to the figures of human activity and more attention to the ground of that activity, we might discover different values, problems, and challenges. Writing this, I imagine Paolo responding, "Of course, that's why education and collegial exchange are so necessary!" This is what his book recommends, and he is not entirely at odds with Haraway's admonitions.

Two sections of the introductory chapter, "Interwoven Issues" and "Intellectual Historiography" define media ecology as a "converging web of knowledge" (p.17) created by its early contributors in diverse fields. Granata sketches out these cross-disciplinary affiliations with such themes as technology and culture (Mumford, Postman, Ellul); communication histories (Innis, M. McLuhan, Havelock, Ong); media as extensions (Hall, Marshall and Eric McLuhan, Leroi-Gourhan); symbolic communications (Langer, Cassirer, Cooley, Hall, Sapir, Whorf, Postman, Richards and Cambridge colleagues); relational and system communications (Park, Innis, Ong, Bateson, Mead, Palo Alto School of Communications, Chicago School of Urban Ecology). The image is of a converging web of knowledge and influence that defines the field of play and the rules of engagement. Granata gives the impression—and I agree with him--that this field of play has not been overly bound up with protocols and has remained remarkably open to innovation and changing media environments.

In his Introduction, Granata is fulsome in his recognition of the technology historian William Kuhns, whose *The Post-Industrial Prophets* (1971) "proved extremely important for the definition of the ecological paradigm. Although the phrase "media ecology" is not mentioned ...

this book offers a set of brilliant insights based on the same theoretical principles that underlie media ecology” (p.19) Kuhns focuses on seven thinkers—Mumford, Giedion, Ellul, Innis, McLuhan, Wiener, and Buckminster Fuller—all associated with different fields of inquiry and akin to Postman’s nominations for his academic curriculum. Granata credits Kuhns’ work “as the first attempt to connect authors, concepts, and approaches...to provide the new study field with a coherent and well-defined frame and scope” (p. 19). Again, we find the emphasis as much on the forging of a school of thought as on the content of its explorations and discoveries.

For more detail on the origins and preoccupations of the Media Ecology movement-school-network, I leave that in Paolo Granata’s capable hands and in his other words. There is much to discover, to re-learn, to reflect on in this very fine introduction.

As noted above, the final chapter on Media Ecology Today could be expanded into another volume picking up on developments later in the story. And perhaps there are people and topics Granata would want to include given more time and room to move. I’m confident he is up the challenge and believe he would appreciate feedback from his colleagues in the field. Read his book to discover the running rules of the media ecology playbook, and let’s keep playing.

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