



Media Ecology

Casey Man Kong Lum

Professor of Communication, William Paterson University, NJ, USA

What is it?

Media ecology is the study of media as environments within which people's sense-making experience manifests itself through and in communication. Media ecologists do not confine their study of media as mere objects external to people or conduits for information transmission. Instead, they examine media, or forms of communication, as physical, sensorial, perceptual and symbolic environments or structures in which people make sense of their world. Media ecology as a theory group, theoretical perspective, or intellectual tradition evolved into being from a multitude of disciplines since the dawn of the ecological movement late in the 1800s.

Who uses the concept?

Seminal thinkers in media ecology include Geddes, Mumford, Havelock, Innis, Ong, McLuhan, Eisenstein, Carey and Postman. Media ecological theories are useful for students and scholars in communication studies, including media and culture, media education, media literacy, media history, the philosophy of media, media ethnography, media and popular culture, etc.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

From one theoretical perspective, media ecology's paradigm questions center around the symbiotic relationship between technology and culture. It seeks to shed light on how changes in communication technology may facilitate changes in people's sense-making experience, and vice versa. Media ecology conceptualizes the interaction between media and culture as symbiotic. Scholars and practitioners in intercultural dialogue would gain

much by considering the opportunities and challenges engendered by the presence of media, the inherent structure of which helps to define communication.

What work remains?

To date, media ecology rarely has been linked to intercultural communication. But media ecological concepts are extremely useful to the study of intercultural communication and intercultural dialogue in particular. One of media ecology's canonical concepts concerns itself with the "trade-offs" brought about by different media or forms of communication. For example, what are the relative benefits and pitfalls inherited in the interaction or sense-making experience of two teenagers from different cultural backgrounds that is conducted (a) entirely in web-based venues over the course of three months and (b) in a home-stay setting of the same duration? What are the ramifications of these trade-offs for the work of scholars in intercultural dialogue and that of practitioners in international education?

Resources

- Lum, C. M. K. (Ed.). (2006). *Perspectives on culture, technology and communication: The media ecology tradition*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Lum, C. M. K. (2014). Media ecology: Contexts, concepts, and currents. In R. Fortner & M. Fackler (Eds.), *The handbook of media and mass communication theory* (pp. 137-153). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Strate, L. (2006). *Echoes and reflections: On media ecology as a field of study*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.