



COVER SHEET

Hearn, Gregory N. and Foth, Marcus (2007) Communicative Ecologies: Editorial Preface.
Electronic Journal of Communication 17(1-2).

Accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au>

Copyright 2007 Communication Institute for Online Scholarship, Inc.

Communicative Ecologies

Editorial Preface/ Préface Editoriale

Greg Hearn & Marcus Foth

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

The term 'ecology' has a lot to offer communication research. This biological analogy opens up research into time and space dynamics, population growth and lifecycles, networks, clusters, niches, and even power relationships between prey and predators. The research perspective may be at either holistic (macro) or individual (micro) levels of analysis. In McLuhan and Postman's tradition of media ecology the concept takes a media-centric view referring to the way in which media structure our lives and how they influence society. The focus of this special issue, the concept of 'communicative ecology', is different insofar as we put an increased emphasis on the meaning that can be derived from the socio-cultural framing and analysis of the local context which communication occurs in. We define a communicative ecology as a milieu of agents who are connected in various ways by various exchanges of mediated and unmediated forms of communication (Tacchi *et al.*, 2003). From a communicative ecology perspective each instance of media use is considered at both individual and community level as part of a complex media environment that is socially and culturally framed. We do not limit the scope of analysis to traditional print, broadcast and telecommunication media but include social networking applications for peer to peer modes of communication, transport infrastructure that enable face to face interaction, as well as public and private places where people meet, chat, gossip.

We conceive of a communicative ecology as having three layers (Foth & Hearn, 2007). A technological layer which consists of the devices and connecting media that enable communication and interaction. A social layer which consists of people and social modes of organising those people – which might include, for example, everything from friendship groups to more formal community organizations, as well as companies or legal entities. And finally, a discursive layer which is the content of communication – that is, the ideas or themes that constitute the known social universe that the ecology operates in.

Using an ecological metaphor opens up a number of interesting possibilities for analyzing place-based communication (e.g., in neighbourhoods, apartment buildings, or – on a larger scale – suburbs and cities). It can help us to better understand the ways social activities are organized, the ways people define and experience their environments, and the implications for social order and organization. For example, in analyzing an apartment complex, an ecological metaphor might suggest first examining the features of the population in the apartment and mapping the patterns of engagement within that population. In addition we could ask how people relate to different places within the apartment, and how this interaction is mediated by the use of technology. Do different groups form around a coffee shop? Do email or cell phone connections define other ecologies? Then we might also be able to study transactions between different ecologies. The ecological metaphor

focuses on whole of system interactions. It also enables us to define boundaries of any given ecology, and to examine how the coherence of that boundary and the stability of each ecology is maintained. What topics of conversation define insiders and outsiders in the ecology? Finally, it also opens up the question of the social sustainability of a communicative ecology.

Similar sorts of questions have been asked by the contributors to this special issue who research human communication phenomena in various place-based contexts. The first article “Comparing the Communication Ecologies of Geo-ethnic Communities: How People Stay on Top of Their Community” by Wilkin *et al.* highlight the benefits to be gained from a communicative ecology approach by presenting a communication map to help communicate with ethnically diverse populations. Shepherd *et al.* follow with their contribution “The Material Ecologies of Domestic ICTs” which examines the socio-cultural context of the media and communication environments we create in our homes. The next article “Primary Attention Groups: A Conceptual Approach to the Communicative Ecology of Individual Community in the Information Age” by Allison applies the layer model described above to analyse individual social groupings. Peeples and Mitchell also found the layer model useful in exploring the 1999 WTO protests in “No Mobs – No Confusions – No Tumult: Organizing Civil Disobedience”. Powell’s article “An Ecology of Public Internet Access: Exploring contextual internet access in an urban community” concludes this special issue by offering a detailed account of the role public internet access plays in the communicative ecology of inner-city residents.

We thank our colleagues for their help and assistance in providing an extraordinary high quality of peer review for this special issue of EJC: Corey Anton, Grand Valley State University; Elija Cassidy, Queensland University of Technology; Christy Collis, Queensland University of Technology; Victor Gonzalez, University of Manchester; Phil Graham, Queensland University of Technology; Joshua Green, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Deborah Jones, Victoria University of Wellington; Jesper Kjeldskov, Aalborg University; Mark Latonero, California State University, Fullerton; Graham Longford, University of Toronto; Harvey May, Queensland University of Technology; Lucy Montgomery, University of Westminster; Tanya Notley, Queensland University of Technology; Christine Satchell, University of Melbourne; Larry Stillman, Monash University; Jo Tacchi, Queensland University of Technology; Wallace Taylor, Cape Peninsula University of Technology; Tommaso Venturini, University of Milano – Bicocca. Our work is supported under the Australian Research Council’s Discovery funding scheme (project number DP0663854) and Dr Marcus Foth is the recipient of an ARC Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Foth, M., & Hearn, G. (2007, forthcoming). Networked Individualism of Urban Residents: Discovering the Communicative Ecology in Inner-City Apartment Complexes. *Information, Communication & Society*, 10(5).

Tacchi, J., Slater, D., & Hearn, G. (2003). *Ethnographic Action Research Handbook*. New Delhi, India: UNESCO.