What is Media Study and Where is It?

In our last issue, inadvertently referred to the Depart-
ment of Media Study as the "Department of Media Stud-
ies." Upon realizing our error, we apologized to the depart-
ment and asked its faculty, Graduate Center of the City 
College of New York, to provide a response to explain why the distinction is important. We follow in his response and his comments on the proposal revising "The Course of Arts and Letters 1978-79.

I am pleased to respond to The Graduate Quill's invitation to explain why I chose the word "study" rather than "studies" and why "media" when I founded the Center for the Advanced Study in Media (now Department of Media Study) twenty years ago. Some of our concerns were both like and unlike other academic organizations which emerged in the early 1960s. It is my purpose to describe briefly the history of the Center for the Advanced Study in Media (now Department of Media Study) and how it was founded.

In the fall of 1960, I was thinking about the future of the humanities in the United States. The humanities were suffering a decline in popularity, and it was clear that new forms of media were changing the way people thought about the world. I wanted to create a new kind of academic institution that would be dedicated to the study of media and its impact on society.

At the time, I was working on a project to study the impact of television on American society. I wanted to bring together scholars from different disciplines to study the ways in which television was changing the way people thought about the world. I also wanted to provide a space for artists and filmmakers to experiment with new forms of media.

I approached several universities with my proposal, but was met with resistance. I eventually received funding from the Ford Foundation, and in 1963, the Center for the Advanced Study in Media opened its doors at the Graduate Center of the City College of New York.

The Center was unique in that it brought together scholars from a variety of disciplines to study media. We had a multidisciplinary approach, studying the history, theory, analysis, social impact, and cultural, ideological, semiotic, and materialistic methodological aspects of media. We also studied the etymology and the evolution of the derivative word, "media," and its use in different inflections.

The Center was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation, which provided him with four million dollars to establish the Institute for Advanced Study in Media. The Institute is still located in Frankfort, The Netherlands. The Center has supported the work of over three hundred scholars and has published over forty books about the Institute and other matters.

The Center has always been dedicated to interdisciplinary research, and we continue to attract scholars from a variety of disciplines to study media. We have had to re-establish a rigorous breadth in undergraduate education. I shall give a few examples from my own Department and then suggest some additional readings which support my arguments. One of my colleagues, Peter Weibel, was trained in medicine and then did his doctoral dissertation in mathematics; his video/digital documentary on Gödel for Austrian and German television was the kind of innovative alternative work that could not be considered, funded, or shown in this country. The West German Government recently provided him with four million dollars to establish the first European research center in Frankfurt, the Institut für Medienkultur. Another colleague, Woody Vasulka, was trained as a mechanical engineer and then as a scriptwriter, while his wife and partner in their pioneering work in the composition and manipulation of the electronic image had been a violinist in the Estonian Symphony Orchestra. Vasulka is currently supported by the Soros Foundation in Hungary to visit each of the Eastern European countries for the purpose of introducing and updating them in the field of electronic media.

The Vasulkas are now based in Santa Fe, and they introduced both Weibel and myself to Christopher Langton at The Santa Fe Institute. While graduate students are no doubt deeply involved in their own professional coursework, teaching duties, and specialized dissertation research, those who they will find time, as soon as possible, to read two books about the Institute and other matters, Roger Lewin's Complexity: The Edge of Chaos (New York: Macmillan, 1993) and Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), edited by W. Mitchell Waldrop. Both exemplify the centrifugal influences involved in "study" and in adapting to both the internal and external environments of a structure, and to the accidents of its process-oriented (not necessarily progressive) development. The analogy to Media Study is that our engagement with the creative arts is similar to the study of embryology and that the development of a new discipline, such as our own, involves an embryology of the kind of dynamic interactive and multiactive field of study which I have attempted to describe here.

Of our own program at this University, Nancy Bogg of the Ford Foundation wrote: "My personal feeling about the Center is that it is a unique model of what ought to be replicated elsewhere in the country, and that it is a media learning center with wide areas, crossing many disciplines and communications interests. It is, for example, the place I always recommend to Third World people who are interested in the broad spectrum of media studies. It occasioned a letter from me, such as this one, explaining the difference between "study" and "studies."