

## **The Figure/Ground Communication: The Meaning of Meaning Is Relationship**

LAUREANO RALON  
Simon Fraser University

This article introduces Figure/Ground Communication ([www.figureground.ca](http://www.figureground.ca)), a research website at the intersection of media studies, continental philosophy and, broadly, the social sciences and the humanities. Through its scholarly interview series, Figure/Ground reflects the changing nature of scholarship and academia in an age of interruption characterized by fractured attention, information overload, and the increasing privatization of postsecondary education.

Figure/Ground Communication is a study and practice in academic journalism. The site investigates a broad range of themes across the humanities and social sciences, specifically those at the crossroads of media studies, continental philosophy, and education. Figure/Ground is academic in the sense that its content is both rigorous and of the highest quality; it is journalistic in the sense that it remains accessible to nonacademic audiences. Therefore it is not purely a collection of academic articles or debates, nor is it simply reporting on events in academia. Rather, it is truly journalistic in the sense that it finds accessible pathways into academic topics through in-depth conversations. Its primary aim is to inform and entertain a highly literate audience made up of university professors as well as graduate and undergraduate students, while remaining accessible to the general public.

The name “Figure/Ground Communication” was borrowed from the cross-disciplinary concept of *Figure & Ground*—a notion related to the *multistability* of perception that is present both in phenomenology and Gestalt psychology, as well as in media studies via Marshall McLuhan. When applied to technology and new media, the concept of *multistability* reveals the multiple possibilities afforded by objects—their ability to reverse into different forms when pushed to the limits of their affordances. More specifically, and for our purposes, the notion alludes to the changing nature of roles in academia. In *No Sense of Place* (1984), Meyrowitz argues that when media change, roles change. Figure/Ground attempts to expose the reversibility of roles in an educational system that is increasingly student-centered; moreover, it brings to the fore the background of intelligibility, or backstage conditions of possibility, that allow new actors to emerge in a changing new media ecology characterized by information overload and digital interactive media.

At the core of Figure/Ground’s research activities is its scholarly interview series ([www.figureground.ca/interviews](http://www.figureground.ca/interviews)). The idea to create a free repository of academic interviews first dawned on me when, as an MA student at Simon Fraser University School of Communication, I stumbled

upon the Bryan Magee TV series on YouTube. I was particularly impressed with his tête-à-tête with Hubert Dreyfus. McGee had made an important contribution to the popularization of philosophy in Britain, and my rediscovering his TV series in a new format inspired me to emulate his work in academic journalism in a different medium and across multiple disciplines. My mentor and first interviewee for Figure/Ground's interview series, Dr. Corey Anton of Grand Valley State University, had a similar YouTube channel, addressing the intersection of communication studies and philosophy. With his encouragement, I came to realize the Internet's power of bridging differences in conversation, especially those in interdisciplinary studies. From the beginning, Figure/Ground Communication was driven by the guiding principles of grand theory, interdisciplinary studies, and methodological pragmatism. Its content consists primarily of a collection of academic interviews with emerging and established university professors. The continuously growing interview series showcases the career trajectories of key scholars, academics, and intellectuals, thus acting as a valuable "who's who" list for anyone with even a passing interest in the topics examined. Past interviewees include Eric McLuhan, Noam Chomsky, Douglas Rushkoff, and Ian Bogost, among other luminaries.

This ever-expanding list unfolded as a kind of network through lateral spread connectivity. Operating within the boundaries of the above-mentioned disciplines, schools of thought, and research interests, the collection grew as scholars began to identify with other scholars. The meaning of meaning is relationship. Each interviewee was asked to suggest other potential interviewees, who were then approached and interviewed in turn. In many cases, interviewees were also asked to draft "guest questions" for subsequent interviewees. Such an approach added consistency, coherency, and cohesiveness to the series, as well as a sense of continuity over time and the possibility of longitudinal analysis.

Empirically, the Figure/Ground series amounts to an ever-growing repertoire of expert opinions, representing a significant contribution to understanding the changing nature of academia and scholarship in an age of digital interactive media. Further, the growing collection of interviews is compelling for several reasons:

- The content is free. Critical academic voices are thus made available to a diverse public. This is a crucial component of democratizing technology.
- The content is accessible. In order for broad dissemination of high theory to be effective, it must be expressed in a form that nonacademic readers will find accessible. The interview format Figure/Ground uses is thus ideal. We ask lively and penetrating questions that allow respondents to cover both personal and professional terrain in resonant ways that don't require dumbing-down leading points.
- The content is diverse. Participants run the spectrum of media ecology theorists, ranging from phenomenologists to linguists to comparative literature superstars. This diversity enhances appeal as the content addresses difficult matters of ideology without cohering around any narrow ideological frame.



**Number of visits (months and years)**

	<b>Jan.</b>	<b>Feb.</b>	<b>Mar.</b>	<b>Apr.</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>Jun.</b>	<b>Jul.</b>	<b>Aug.</b>	<b>Sep.</b>	<b>Oct.</b>	<b>Nov.</b>	<b>Dec.</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2009</b>												294	<b>294</b>
<b>2010</b>	604	887	324	292	514	227	929	2,621	1,432	1,736	1,630	1,923	<b>13,119</b>
<b>2011</b>	2,290	2,115	3,259	3,041	5,775	5,329	5,246	2,967	2,549	3,200	3,766	2,999	<b>42,536</b>
<b>2012</b>	3,602	5,117	6,108	4,018	7,034	2,877							<b>28,756</b>

*WordPress statistics. Retrieved on June 10, 2012.*

This growth and recognition denotes the existence of a specialized niche and a clearly defined target audience consisting primarily of faculty, graduate students, and senior undergraduate students. Figure/Ground has proven to be an extremely valuable resource for young graduate students contemplating academic careers as well as aspiring university professors. At present, the site is undergoing a profound transformation that includes recruitment of collaborators and a planned transition into a student-led online magazine. Recently a number of graduate students have partnered with the site, attracted by the quality of its original content and the possibility of enhancing their own portfolios, making connections, and developing interviewing techniques. Most notably, graduate students Andrew Hines (University College Dublin, School of Philosophy), Gina Conley (Kent State University, School of Journalism and Mass Communication), and Katharine Armstrong (Georgetown University, Communication, Culture and Technology) have recently joined the project and taken on specific tasks with an eye to evolving the site into an online journal. The short-term goal is to continue to transition into a student-led, interdisciplinary online journal; the long-term goal is to turn the collection of interviews into the largest repository of its kind on the net—a free resource that students can access, consult, and even quote in their academic papers.

### Reference

Meyrowitz, J. (1984). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.