

# Lori Emerson

INTERVIEW

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**Interview Series:**  
Media Archaeology:  
Encoded Memories  
and the Digital  
Society

**Silent Technologies,  
Speaking Interfaces:  
Media Archaeology  
with Lori Emerson**



**Dear Lori, as one of the few people deeply engaged in Media Archaeology and the founder of the Media Archaeology Lab in Boulder Colorado. Where you've gathered many memories related to the field, how would you define Media Archaeology? Do you think it should be confined to a single discipline? Which other fields do you see as closely related to it?**

I am fond of defining media archaeology as a loose collection of alternative approaches to and practices involving the history of technology.

I often return Siegfried Zielinski's 1996 introduction of the term "media archaeology" to describe a turn already underway toward digging out "secret paths in history, which might help us to find our way into the future."

Zielinski and others associated with media archaeology around the same time were seeking to move away from what they saw as conventional practices of historiography that overly favored both linear narratives (that in turn reinforce the idea of technological progress) and aesthetic or narrative representations of technology and instead delve into technologies that were dead-ends and failures as well as into their material underpinnings. In this way, while it touches on aspects of history, art history, critical theory, Science and Technology Studies (STS), I have always seen media archaeology as invested in "undiscipline."



## What do you think is at stake when dominant narratives of technological progress erase alternative or failed media histories?



I appreciate this question! Ever since I discovered the existence of avant-garde and experimental poetry in my early 20s, I have always been invested in uncovering, documenting, and celebrating heterogeneity in all its forms--not only to keep alive the possibility of joy and playfulness but also our sense of the ever-present possibility of transformation into something definitively other. I try to refuse to contribute to the maintenance of any dominant narrative as it inevitably excludes vast swathes of people, cultures, histories, practices, and on and on. Refusing dominant narratives of technological progress is just one small part of this orientation.

## Could you share an example from your own work where uncovering a forgotten or “invisible” interface led to a surprising insight?

My first book *Reading Writing Interfaces* emerged from an article I started working on in graduate school that explored what happens when we see Emily Dickinson's fascicles (hand-made, hand-sewn booklets) as experiments with interface--in her case, the interface was pen/pencil/paper. At that time, it was relatively unusual in literary studies and media studies not only to see poets as tinkering or even hacking writing technologies but to see writing experiments in the 19th century as being part of a continuum of experiments that extended well into the 20th and even 21st centuries rather than there being an abrupt break that happened with the introduction of the personal computer.



## Do you see Media Archaeology as a methodology a theory or an archival practice? Or is it all three at once?



As I try to suggest above, I think the power of media archaeology is its flexibility and its refusal to cohere around any one theoretical, methodological, or archival approach. It can be just one aspect or it can be all three at once--the key is to be an-, as in “not” or “without”, perhaps even more than anti-.

**As you might know we are in the process of creating an online platform to bring together scholars engaged in Media Archaeology in Istanbul. What advice would you offer to those who are interested in Media Archaeology and aspire to pursue work in this field as you have done?**

I am thrilled to hear you are developing an online platform to support media archaeological ways of thinking and experiments! Over the years, I have noticed the increasing tendency for scholars and writers to define media archaeology as this or that, usually based on a few sentences too often taken out of context from one or two well known media archaeologists. My only wish is for all of us to work to keep the spirit of media archaeology open and engaged especially with its complexity and its heterogeneity rather than using it as a lever to advance one's position. Just as one small example: to counter my own reference above to Zielinski, there are so many different people from different countries and different genders undertaking a wonderfully wide variety of work in media archaeology--why simply keep repeating the assertions of a few men from the 1990s?



**What challenges arise when working with obsolete technologies — both technically and epistemologically — and how do you deal with them in your research or pedagogy?**

The challenges with working with obsolete technologies are practically endless (the parts constantly break and/or they are no longer being manufactured or there is simply a lack of documentation for how the technology works and how to fix it, or the technology is so blackboxed it cannot be opened up or repaired at all) that one has to learn to view these challenges as opportunities to learn something about the technology, even if it's an opportunity to learn about the built-in limitations to, for example, a particular manufacturing process or design decision. Everything has to be approached as potentially revealing or informative rather than as a hurdle one must overcome.





**Looking forward.  
how do you envision  
the future of media  
archaeology? Will it  
remain a niche field,  
or do you see it  
becoming  
increasingly vital in  
our rapidly digitizing  
world?**

If you agree with me that media archaeology has a predilection for moving away from linear narratives and/or aesthetic representations of technology, I doubt that it will ever gain a lot of traction beyond the work of a relatively small group of people. That said, more and more people are increasingly using the phrase “media archaeology” to describe any activity that involves the history of technology; in this case, returning to the past to re-enliven possibilities for the present and future already seems to be becoming more popular, especially as contemporary computing and networking practices are being used to amass more power over more people. So, even though I don’t like it when the words and ideas of people I respect are taken out of context, it is exciting to see so many people actively searching for alternatives!