Intellectual and Cultural Leaders of Minnesota: Oral History Project 2013-14

Institute for Advanced Study
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Interviewee: Mary Treacy
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Activist on Access to Information

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Mary Treacy: We have several things to talk about this afternoon, and I am trying to put them in chronological order; maybe that's not the right order. It goes back, I believe, this discussion, to what I refer to generically as “building the Minnesota community of the book.” Many years ago, the Library of Congress was tasked with the job of establishing centers for the book in each of the 50 states. When the Library of Congress got to Minnesota, we said to them, “We already have a community of the book. We think that the aggregate community of the book really is the center for the book”. And thus began a rather free-form center for the book, The Minnesota Center for the Book. It happened to be housed at Metronet, which is the library cooperative serving the metropolitan Twin Cities area, but the Center for the Book was really serving the entire state of Minnesota.

The pieces of the Center for the Book were the publishers, the writers, the libraries, the academic institutions, the booksellers – it was a broadly-based but cohesive community that was building. We published The Minnesota Review of Books. The Minnesota Literature Newsletter, which was also a part of the community of the book, was a key, binding this community together. As time went on, the community existed, and became known as the Minnesota Center for the Book, and we were funded to do some projects. That was quite successful. The Center was in place when the Hennepin County Library Association decided that they would no longer be producing Northern Lights and Insights – interviews with Minnesota writers and publishers in the same community. We said, “Rather than let that drop, it can be a project of the Minnesota Center for the Book.” So, for several years, those interviews, very low-key but very important, with members of the Minnesota community of the book, continued under the aegis of the Minnesota Center for the Book, and thus Metronet. The collection is all at the Minnesota Historical Society today. Years ago, we got a grant from the Minnesota State Legislature, I believe it was $30,000, to make copies of those interviews that had been collected over the years and make them accessible to the regional library systems and to the Minnesota Historical Society. Looking back just recently, I discovered there are now 592 interviews with Minnesota writers, and other members of the Minnesota community of the book, on the shelves of the Minnesota Historical Society, which I find fairly astounding. Now the problem is, they are standing on the shelves at the Minnesota Historical Society. They need to be taken off the shelves and given new life by digitalization and other means of distribution. So that’s where we are now: trying to bring to life those tapes that have been gathering dust on the shelves and make them much more accessible to the public. Some have probably outlived their usefulness; some are truly exciting. Many are with writers, and probably some publishers, that have died in the interim. Those are rare treasures. They are lengthy interviews and really quite in-depth interviews that have some real surprises. I kind of breezed through them recently, and was surprised myself at the treasures that are there, waiting to be opened up. That’s where we are today, on the cusp of digitized access to that same material.

Peter Shea: It’s going to be a long cusp.

Mary Treacy: That’s okay. We have a vision, and we have the raw material. That’s the main point.
**Peter Shea:** Yeah, the material is preserved, and now the technology can begin working on it. It’s a strikingly broad-minded collection. Reading through, the names that are associated with Minnesota literature come up, but then, across a really broad area of professions and accomplishments, you have serious representation. How did you find these people? How did you decide who to do next?

**Mary Treacy:** We always had a wish list, and we always had a list of people we thought would be great interviewers. One of the fun things was to associate the right interviewer with the right interviewee. Sometimes, those connections are a little jarring, and then they turn out to be the most fun of all. Someone who you’d never think would be interested in – whatever would be just the best interviewer, because they wanted to know more about that. Sometimes, it would be just a really avid reader. Sometimes it would be a subject matter specialist. But we’d get those people to interview the dream author. Or we would get an author to interview a publisher, or a publisher to interview an author. It had some mismatches, that way. We always had wish lists. It always had to do with who was available when, but matching the interviewer with the interviewee was the fun thing. Getting people who would be willing to take a few hours to do this: it would depend always on the generosity of the people involved. This was a no-budget – not low-budget – but no-budget operation. They’d just come, sometimes into the Channel 6 studio, sometimes into the Metronet office, and just set around the table and talk, low technology, no budget.

**Peter Shea:** What kind of funding did you have for this? Where you paying the cameraperson?

**Mary Treacy:** Heavens no! The staffer, almost always David Carlson, was working for Metronet on an hourly basis, but he was doing other things as well. We probably had some project money. The major funding was probably the $30,000 we got from the legislature. That was really distribution money, not production money. It was done on a shoestring, no question, and out of the true generosity of the artists involved in the effort. The programs would be shown on cable, always on channel 6, as I recall, and frequently on suburban cable systems. They got immediate feedback, and that was a good thing. Now we talk more about the heritage, the legacy, but at the time it was good PR too.

**Peter Shea:** I occasionally get somebody calling to ask, “When is my show going to be on?” – even now, with all the options. People want to see themselves on television.

**Mary Treacy:** Absolutely! And in those days, we had to mail out tapes. David Carlson had a good network through the cable system, and that connected to the library system. It’s really difficult to imagine how we did business, in those days, but we had fewer channels, so I suppose we had better coverage. Suburban cable systems, and Channel 6, were good distributors of the products.

**Peter Shea:** I had a lot to do with Metronet, back in those days, and around that time. I remember how many projects were coming through those offices, how it was possible to
find the energy for many projects that didn’t have good funding. It was a really exciting time.

**Mary Treacy:** It was an exciting time. The technology was just coming on; people were sometimes ready to get into the technology. We had an Internet base long before bigger systems could. My favorite quote has always been, “The bigger the elephant, the better chance the monkey has.” Metronet was somewhat the monkey of the library business because we could move fast, and the technology was moving fast. Video was getting much more portable, and therefore much more accessible to ordinary people, and cable was getting much more accessible, so it was a good time to be trying new things, to see how they went.

**Peter Shea:** What was the idea of Metronet? It was a funny, amorphous kind of mission you had. How did you understand what you were up to?

**Mary Treacy:** I didn’t ponder it too much. The idea was to bring the libraries together; it worked pretty well in the outstate areas where you had a couple of academic libraries and schools—a manageable number of institutional connections. In the Metro area, there were 500 or 600; we never were too sure how many libraries there were, and they ranged from the University of Minnesota libraries to big corporate libraries to elementary schools. We couldn’t do a lot of direct service, and so what we had to think about was, “What's the common ground? How do we serve the common good?” That was usually other than direct service. It was during an era when the technology was moving in. Experimenting with the technology was one of the challenges—to do so not with an egocentric approach but with a collective approach to building the technology, so that when we thought about systems, whether they were reference systems or interlibrary loan systems, we’d think collectively about how the libraries could best do it, and how the libraries could best do it in cooperation with other partner organizations and institutions. It was a challenging time, but an exciting time. You had not only the challenge of what needed to be done as we moved into the information age, but also the tools with which you could play, and see what could be done.

**Peter Shea:** I remember the online directory of libraries, which now seems like a pretty small project compared to what Wikipedia can do, but then it was unimaginable that you could search all sorts of libraries by different tags. The thing was physically housed at Land Management, I think.

**Mary Treacy:** Just to find out who and where the library institutions were was a major project; I think it took over a year to work that project out. It never was finished, because you never knew when the next one was going to pop up or disappear.

**Peter Shea:** That was before the Internet; people were just dialing up to this central computer. The preparation for the Internet was those years of people trying simple projects, or relatively simple projects.
**Mary Treacy:** It identified the early adopters, who would literally play with the technology and see what you could make it do. The libraries had kind of a head start on all this, because, from time immemorial, they had been working on formats that were transportable and interoperable. They really did have the basic ingredients: very good interoperable systems. We definitely wanted to build on that, before everything was cast in concrete. We’re reaping the results, not just of Metronet by any means but of libraries being ahead of the game, today.

**Peter Shea:** How do you see the role of libraries today? You did a lot of work to make sure that the libraries were leading. Do you see the libraries still having the kind of leadership role you want them to have?

**Mary Treacy:** I think they do. I just came from a conference on public libraries and open government, and that really made me think about that specific slice of the challenge. I think libraries need to think of themselves as the stewards of a large portion of the information resources of a community, whatever that community is – whether it’s an academic institution or town. As stewards of that information, what do they do besides provide immediate access to what’s on the shelves? That’s where the challenge is. Part of it is to bring the community along into the information environment. Some of it is to get a good read on what their community really needs in terms of information resources. I think there are some serious challenges – exciting challenges – for the library to probably expand their role. I took hope, from this conference I was attending, about their role in open government. There is so much happening, on the open government front. I was thrilled to see libraries really stepping up to the plate and getting involved with that, even though some of the open government is somewhat tedious, perhaps. There were some exciting stories about – in this case, public libraries – and open government initiatives in their own communities.

**Peter Shea:** Open government has been a big part of your life, the last a while – access to government information, that sort of matter – can you say a little more what that’s about, what you are thinking there?

**Mary Treacy:** Open government right now is kind of like that definition of an elephant: it all depends on who you’re talking to. To some, it’s e-delivery of resources; to some, it’s much deeper. To me, it’s that information produced by and about the government belongs to the people. The essence of democracy is that people need access to information about the government in order to be the decision-makers they ought to be. We have a little way to go with that. That’s what I think the challenge is. An informed democracy that engages with running the nation’s business, the community’s business, is what we’re after. It’s knowing the resources and then using those resources to be an informed citizen, a participant in the process. It’s pretty Madisonian – James Madison that is – thinking.

**Peter Shea:** How do those issues play out in the Twin Cities metro area, in Minnesota? Are there particular challenges, particular initiatives that you like in Minnesota?
Mary Treacy: Possibilities, actually. We have a strong brigade of people working at the local levels throughout the state on open government at a very immediate and hands-on sort of level. I’d like to see libraries be very involved in those processes. I think the more people know the possibilities, the more they will expect. We have an issue of the public’s low expectations of, and awareness of, how information can be a resource of inestimable value to them in solving their own personal and community’s and state’s and their nation’s problems. The more people know, the more they want to know, and the more they know what’s possible to know, the more they know how they can use information to make better decisions.

Peter Shea: I’m thinking of a conversation I had with my wonderful doctor a few years ago. I said, if I get seriously injured or sick, it’s my ambition to not have my hospital kill me. Maybe the illness kills me. Maybe the injury kills me – but not the hospital. Can you tell me where, in the Twin Cities metro area, they wash their hands? Beyond doing a double-take – it wasn’t a long double-take, because she knows me – there wasn’t any way of saying where they wash their hands. This translates to some very specific figures about the transmission rates of particular kinds of infections that basically grow in hospitals. Where are the comparative statistics on hospital-raised infections?

Mary Treacy: I don’t know the answer, but I could probably figure out where to look. I think I could figure out where to go look and, if it’s not there, what to do about it. If it isn’t collected information, then who is in charge of deciding what gets collected? That would be my next question. Influence that!

Peter Shea: That was the most concrete example. I wanted to know where to have people take me, if I got sick.

Mary Treacy: You’re way along the continuum because you knew to ask the question. And she didn’t answer it by saying, “There’s a law that says they have to.” She gets a lot of points too. Just because they have the law that says they have to doesn’t mean that that’s the answer to your question. That’s the way I want people to think, “And if not, why not?” I’ve got a right to determine what the questions are. You could take that same example and apply it to safe food or what’s running on the railroad tracks from North Dakota through Minneapolis. There are all kinds of ways you can start asking that question and just follow the information chain.

Peter Shea: The other way it came up for me, just yesterday: I was in a little Chinese restaurant in a little town. I eat there a lot. There was a dish on the menu that was five kinds of seafood. I thought, “That’s a lot of kinds of animals to keep safe. Maybe I’ll do a dish with two ingredients instead of five.” But then I thought, “Given the particular challenges of cooking the kinds of things that oriental restaurants cook, how do I know whether there have been instances of food poisoning?” I really would like to know.

Mary Treacy: I would go to the county public health <board> and find out.

Peter Shea: These things are likely to be paper records, of some sort?
Mary Treacy: They’re probably online. This is something I’m quite involved with: making those records available in a format that a normal person could get at. The law says the information has to be available; there’s a long step between available and accessible. I have been working at the federal level, to make sure that the information at the federal level is produced in a format that can be downloaded and made accessible to a normal person or institution that needs it. It’s a whole different level: availability and accessibility. I see the people like the Twin City brigade: they’re real partners in making it ultimately accessible at the local level.

Peter Shea: I imagine that accessibility depends upon somebody asking for it to be accessible.

Mary Treacy: I’m worried equally about building a community that cares and knows enough to ask, to expect. I think low expectations is a huge issue in the information game. Where do people get their information? From people who are well-paid to feed it to them over the media. I think civic literacy is a huge problem – whatever you want to call it – I don’t have a good term for it. We’ve called it all kinds of things; “information literacy” was hot for a while. I think it’s “civic literacy,” but by tomorrow it may have another name. An aware and concerned public is a big part of the challenge. As a friend once said, “Most people don't know that there is such a thing as a structured approach to information.” It’s kind of hopeless, if you don’t know there’s a structured approach.

Peter Shea: Can you say just a little bit for the millions on this end of the camera? What do you mean by “a structured approach?”

Mary Treacy: Information tends to be organized, somehow. It’s not just random. Whether it’s a government agency or a public library, it’s been organized in some approachable manner. People don’t have the skills to know how to do it, and they don’t really know that there is such a thing.

Peter Shea: As somebody who teaches college, I wonder: how do you change that? You don't ask the questions if you expect that there's not going to be an answer. They don’t wonder things that otherwise would be just obvious to ask. I just wonder how you overcome that.

Mary Treacy: I think you’d have to start in the crib, cradle, to encourage the asking of questions, tiresome as it is to answer a three-year-old’s why questions. You’ve got to believe that that’s how they learn. In school, it’s not answers; it’s questions that matter. Tests do not test questions; they discourage questions. They expect answers that can be filled in with a soft lead pencil. I wish the media would help ask the questions and not always have to be the authority. There are some trying that now; I was reading just today about ways that the media are trying to ask the questions as well as answer them. I don’t mean the television media so much; I was thinking more of the print media or the online media.
**Peter Shea:** It's a devilish problem: you can mandate that the information be available, but the critical component is – somebody wanting it.

**Mary Treacy:** You can lead a horse to water; is that what you’re saying?

**Peter Shea:** Something like that. Or rather: the trough is built so that no horse’s nose could ever get into it, but they’ll modify the trough as soon as some horse comes to drink. Maybe the second or third time, they’ll fix the trough. But if no horse knows,… I think of all these librarians with this superb training, waiting for a question that never comes.

**Mary Treacy:** I’ve always thought: if librarians could only show how eager they are to get those questions! I don’t know how you’d do that. Wear a big “ask me” thing maybe, but that doesn’t quite do it either. The person who was working on the History Day project said that it was clear to him that some of the better work that the students were doing was done after they engaged with a human being and asked the questions. It wasn’t just more resources, a bibliography or something. Their ability to ask the questions was enhanced when they engaged with a human being – which I think is an interesting thing to think about. It doesn’t have to be a librarian; it could be their dad. It doesn’t matter who they engage with. It’s good to ask questions.

**Peter Shea:** I wonder if it makes sense to try to move librarians and classrooms a bit more. The thing that seems to happen in colleges so much is: “Go ask the librarian.” Usually people find some other way that doesn’t involve engaging with a human being to answer a question. Maybe what we need is tighter teams.

**Mary Treacy:** I always tell – this was years and years ago – I was at a small college, and I was the librarian, and the English teacher – wise man that he was – suggested that I sit in on the class. And I did. The first student gets up and says, “I was going to write a research paper about cancer; I went to the library, and they didn’t have anything.” The second one was, “I was going to write a research paper about the Civil War; I went to the library, and they didn’t have anything.” <There were> six of those, and I thought, “There is something really wrong here.” I realized it was something about meeting them at the door and saying, “What are we going to talk about today?” – engaging right from the outset. Because they didn’t expect to find anything and, sure enough, they didn’t find anything! That led to: they decided they wanted to challenge me. One girl wanted to write a paper on bubblegum. She wore me out; I had to back off on that one. It was a fun thing, and it was a really important thing for me to learn. They were well-educated, intelligent young people. They just didn’t expect…

**Peter Shea:** Maybe it makes sense to loop this back to our beginning again, to Northern Lights. You put a lot of work into making sure that 500+ interviews with interesting Minnesotans were on the shelves at libraries. What do you see it doing for Minnesota people, to have access to information about interesting Minnesotans?

**Mary Treacy:** I think if you can get a digitized, 45-minute conversation with Bill Holm, or William Kent Krueger or J.F. Powers or whoever, it gives you a whole new insight
into where they were coming from. You can still talk to William Kent Krueger, but you can’t talk to J.F. Powers and learn what was on his mind – what was behind what he wrote. I think it’s an incredible resource. Even with those still among us: having a really focused hour with them can change your approach to all of their work. These were not all interviews with Minnesota writers. Sometimes, there would be a publisher or an illustrator, and then you get another kind of insight: what’s on the mind of a publisher, when they choose to publish a certain thing? What is the illustrator thinking about? I saw a large portrait of Harry Potter the other night at the Ramsey County Library, done by Mary GrandPré, and it wasn’t the same Harry Potter that you see in the movies. That was really illuminating for me, to see what came from her hand and went into the book. I think it’s a wonderful opportunity, even to know that it’s a living, thinking, breathing human being that produced that. It is sometimes just exciting.

Peter Shea: You’re talking to the person least in need of convincing on that score. My debt to the work you’ve done in establishing a tradition of documenting Minnesota’s intellectual life is immense. You and Beth Friend and a bunch of people convinced me that this is really the most important work that I can imagine doing – to make people aware of who their neighbors are and who’s living in the state with them and what they could be.

Mary Treacy: The interconnectedness between the writer and the publisher and the bookseller – the whole community supports all of the above, and the reader. I think Minnesota has a wonderful heritage in that regard. There’s a, “We’re all in it together” feeling about it. I hope we can maintain that. I don’t really have the same sense, but maybe we can do a better job building it. I think some of the regions have done a wonderful job of building the community of the book within their own regions. That’s exciting to me. We just had the book awards that go to the North Shore area, a wonderful example of the community building within itself.

Peter Shea: That’s part of the problem, isn’t it? When you and I were hanging around the community of the book, you could touch it. The presses, the Loft, the publishers: these were pretty low-to-the-ground enterprises. There was a lot of interpenetration. The bookstores weren’t fighting to make a certain profit margin or they’d fold, either. They were really devoted to this.

Mary Treacy: And the Women’s Press, I would add to the list. It’s an endless list, but there were key players that stand out.

Peter Shea: The question is: 20, 30 years after these things got founded, how to maintain the spirit of, “We’re all in this together.”

Mary Treacy: I’m not as involved as I was. I think there are a lot of social networks that are still going on – different players, obviously, the generations change. There's lots of new people; no question about that. But I think, at the regional level, and even by genre in the cities, there’s a lot going on. The academic institutions – some of them – are still
quite engaged. But there is lots happening in the social networks that aren’t quite as visible as print on pages.

**Peter Shea:** Yeah, there is the question whether the energy that once went into publication is now getting diverted to blogs and websites and stuff like that.

**Mary Treacy:** It still takes some institution whose job it is to keep the community fed. That’s a job, and sometimes that’s a hard one. I always used to say, “People will pay for goods and services, but not so much for building a collaborative entity.” We probably need something that keeps the gears moving.

**Peter Shea:** The WD-40 of intellectual life – it’s infrastructure work!

**Mary Treacy:** Yeah, it is.

**Peter Shea:** You stop replacing the rivets in the bridge, and this year it doesn’t collapse, and next year it doesn’t collapse, but eventually, stuff happens: you stop finding ways for publishers to talk to bookstores to talk to authors to talk to the public. It isn’t that anything collapses overnight. It’s that, over time, they grow distant.

**Mary Treacy:** You have to have a place to put things. Like with Northern lights: we just needed a place to put it, and then it could continue. If you have to spend five years creating a place to put it, then you’ve lost all the energy that was in the system in the first place.

**Peter Shea:** My line from the old days about Metronet with something like, “If everybody stopped thinking about it at the same time, it would disappear.” It had no existence apart from the things that occurred to people to do with it. They were changing monthly. It was a place to put things, because it was a place that had a broad enough mandate to take on fiscal agency for projects, to take on publicity for events.

**Mary Treacy:** To connect the dots, sometimes. There would be other things that were related that you could connect something too. It had breadth in it from the beginning.

**Peter Shea:** Are there organizations like that still around, organizations that are flexible enough in their mandate that projects that need to happen can happen?

**Mary Treacy:** I’m sure there are. I’m kind of out of the scene now. I know when I wanted to do a project with the library, the friends of the library embraced it, and when we needed a fiscal agent, the Community Development people took it on. The Independent Scholars will take things on. I think there are places. It’s whether we know where they are that’s another problem. Independent Scholars will take things on. But some institutions, if they’re big institutions, they really can’t move outside… You really do need free-floating, amorphous entities that will go where something is needed.

**Peter Shea:** You need a bumper sticker, “Lots more monkeys, some more elephants.”
Mary Treacy: I really do believe that you need nimble entities that can rise to the occasion.

Peter Shea: Just for those people who are curious about your current whereabouts, because you've done so many things, you're working on some access to information projects now. Can you just update people a little on what you're currently doing?

Mary Treacy: I'm bi-locating, which is kind of tricky. I work, full time, for an organization which is DC-based, inside the beltway based, called openthegovernment.org. I work some of the time in DC and some of the time in my home office in Minneapolis, and I'm the outreach person. There has not been an outreach person before. 300 million people and hundreds of thousands of organizations are mine to outreach to. My main priorities, partly based on what the President has identified in his plan for access to information, are nutrition, food, and the environment, which is a lot to cover right there. That is where I have been focusing, and meeting with organizations – for example, a sustainable agriculture organization – talking about how access to federal government information matters to their organization and their constituents, and then hoping they will join the open the government partnership to work towards that end. It's slow business, to be sure, but the outreach part is great fun. Sometimes, finding the information thread that's buried in a project is kind of hard. There is one there. We talk about: who sets the information agenda, who was paying for the information to be produced in the first place, who has a vested interest in that kind of thing, and then how, if the information is gathered, how is it made accessible? Is it accessible – even in the case of agriculture – at a physical unit that's useful to people? Can you look up and see what the data related to agriculture in Meeker County looks like to the agriculture extension agent or to the feed dealer or to the farmer in Meeker County. We talk a lot about how that information thread works. It's the same thing. It's the same information thread or chain or whatever you want to call it. Chain is more overt; thread is kind of invisible. You have to pull at it. It's so subtle, and woven throughout the fabric. That's what I do: talk with organization after organization after organization and see how better information – more accessible – could be helpful to their constituents be more productive or happier or whatever it is they want to be. Water is a big issue; I work with Clean Water Action. I work with IATP, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. I am naming Minnesota groups now. There are a lot of Minnesota groups that are wonderful to work with that have national and global implications. It's a new position, a new role; it's exciting to see what the possibilities might be. And "Information matters!" is my mantra; it really matters. And the more you know how to make it work for you, the better off you'll be.

Peter Shea: I'm thinking of a couple of stories from interviews I did years ago with a young farmer trying to farm organic in southwest Minnesota. Partly, to make it work, he has to go for weird crops, crops that have really high return, and he's not putting pesticides on them, so he gets weird bugs. He talks about going through the field with his iPhone, snapping a picture of the bug, shooting it off to the state entomologist, and saying, "Is this something I need to worry about?" Or the other one is: he's growing
radishes. Nobody here grows radishes. So he shoots a picture of the radishes, sends it off to a guy in California who raises radishes, has been raising them for years, and says, “Is this the way these things are supposed to look, three weeks in, a month into the growing season?” The guy sends him back a note saying, “Yeah, that’s about right.”

**Mary Treacy:** Given the climatological differences between California and Minnesota, you’d think you’d have other results.

**Peter Shea:** Who knows? The guy maybe was allowing for it. Just the idea that the farmer in the field is now constantly using his iPhone in the course of making decisions about managing the thing that’s right to hand.

**Mary Treacy:** According to John Deere, he's on a half-million dollar tractor, and he never has to get his feet wet; he's just pushing buttons on the keyboard and magic happens. I like the guy who has a real radish in his hand.

**Peter Shea:** The other thing about that tractor: press John Deere, and they can't explain to you why it is you need to human being on that tractor at all. It turns at the end of the row by satellite instruction, and nobody in their right mind would take a wrench to it. It’s kind of for the satisfaction of the farmer that they deign to put a chair in the thing. The farmers who are out there handling the radishes: they don’t talk about killing weeds, they talk about delaying them, because, without heavy chemicals, you can’t really kill them; you can just injure them, disable them. That’s hard; that takes specialized information.

**Mary Treacy:** That would be when I would ask who is doing the research. I’d like somebody who understands.

**Peter Shea:** The kind of farming everybody wants to have happen: the little farm and the organic farm is cutting-edge, is so information intensive. There isn’t a universally acknowledged way to do that kind of farming. It’s complicated and improvisational, and so having the information you’re talking about available in the field is so important. I’ve seen that. You think of information as for lobbyists and policymakers.

**Mary Treacy:** No, it’s for practitioners and those who are guiding the decisions of practitioners.

**Peter Shea:** Yeah, crop experts: big deals in southwest Minnesota. To get a loan, you need somebody who can judge your field. We miss that; in the city, unless you go talk to farmers, you miss that incredible information need in rural Minnesota, and how potentially revolutionary the web is.

**Mary Treacy:** One way or the other, for good or for evil, I would say. The web is neither; it’s both.

**Peter Shea:** You haven’t really talked about evil yet. You’ve had enough experience; this is kind of an important question. What worries you?
Mary Treacy: That the bad guys are going to control the information: the production of, the distribution of, the whole thing. That’s what worries me all the time. I don’t say who the bad guys are. I don’t want to name them. I just want to get that out there. Information has inestimable power for good or for evil. It depends on who’s managing it, who’s calling the shots. If all of the research is being determined by the bad guys, the results are probably going to reflect that – no matter what piece of it you want to take, the distribution system, or whatever. This is why the good guys have to be of informed and alert. I always tell the story: when my two sons were three and four, they asked the question what was wrong with not smoking, because, if you have to advertise it that much, there must be something wrong with it. I thought at the time that my skepticism might have influenced their tender young minds. On the other hand, maybe it was a good thing that they were alert to the fact that you should be wary at all times, not scared, but wary.

Peter Shea: I was at a meeting recently where someone explained, maybe one more time than she needed to, how harmless the larger wood ticks are. By the third time, people were turning white. The first time, yeah; the second time, wait, if they have to tell me it’s harmless again…

Mary Treacy: Yeah, same point. One time I served on the State Board of Education with the wisest woman ever, Ruth Meyer – an American Indian woman who I wish we had taped – who said that the goal of the public education system ought to be “to enhance the perceptive paranoia of the students.” There is something to that. If you know the power of information and you know your information rights and you know how to use information, that’s a powerful thing. A little paranoia can make you resistant to some of the information that’s heaped upon you.

Peter Shea: Do you see serious and sustained efforts to dry up the information that might allow for alternatives to big corporate reality?

Mary Treacy: Yeah, I certainly do. The ownership of the media is the topic for another whole discussion. It’s hard to have the good win out, in the information sea. And part of the problem is the media itself. I was a great student of Herb Schiller, who taught us that 40 years ago or 50 years ago, or my dad who would say, “Don’t argue with the man who buys ink by the barrel.” The modern translation of that has nothing to do with ink or barrels, but “who owns the tools of communication.” So you can’t separate communication and information. “Perceptive paranoia” – really.