

S W E D I S H  
C O L L E G I U M  
*for* ADVANCED STUDY

Lecture

**MERLIN DONALD**

Fellow, SCAS.

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*The Modern Communications Environment:  
An Evolutionary Perspective*

Thursday, 18 February, 6:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall  
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala

The lecture will be followed by a reception. Prior registration is required.  
Please contact [rsvp@swedishcollegium.se](mailto:rsvp@swedishcollegium.se) no later than 15 February to sign up.



## ABOUT MERLIN DONALD

Merlin Donald obtained his Ph.D. from McGill University, Montreal, QC, in 1968. A cognitive neuroscientist with a background in philosophy, he is the author of many scientific papers and two influential books: *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Harvard University Press, 1991) and *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). He is a Fellow of the Canadian Psychological Association, the Royal Society of Canada and the World Academy of Art and Science. He is also Honorary Professor at Aarhus University.

Merlin Donald's theoretical work on human cognitive evolution bridges several disciplines in the sciences, social sciences and humanities. His main thesis is that our mental powers as a species are closely tied to our emergence as cultural beings. The human journey has not been only about brain evolution, but rather about brain-culture co-evolution.

The human mind is thus the middle kingdom, the joint progeny of brain and culture. The brain contributed a source of raw biological intelligence with a potential for being rewired for symbolic communication. Culture – especially in its technological aspect but also in its key role in the invention of languages – did most of the rewiring.

In our case, the evolution of one component (mind) could not be isolated from the other (culture). The term 'culture' includes material culture and technology, which have repeatedly revolutionized the processes of thought and memory. Donald is currently trying to understand how the slow-moving biology of the brain can deal with the rapidly changing 'cognitive ecology' triggered by the new media and the Internet.

## ABSTRACT

We are living through an information technology (IT) revolution aimed directly at the human mind. It is changing the way basic cognitive operations like attention, thought, memory, and perception play out in the social networks of culture.

Unlike the Gutenberg revolution, the IT revolution is machine-driven, intelligent, and intimate. It changes the basic structure of the cognitive ecology. Judging from what we know of brain development, the cognitive ecology can deeply affect the developing human brain.

This topic - the impact of IT on the brain - has triggered many recent books and articles, ranging from Utopian dreams of a future human "singularity," to fears of an intellectual and spiritual Armageddon in which human beings become shallow, distractible, and addicted to the media.

We have been through these kinds of discussion before, and they will resolve nothing without a theoretical framework to give shape to the debate. This lecture will try to provide a very long-term evolutionary framework within which we can approach this important topic.