Excerpt from Margaret Mead's 1968 paper Cybernetics of Cybernetics*

In conclusion I should like to tell you a story which I think may be useful to our new society. I went to the organizational meeting of the Society for General Systems Theory that was held in connection with a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Atlanta. The audience was typical, a few old men and women, five or six people who had arranged the meeting and knew exactly what they wanted to do, and a few diverse and unidentifiable characters. They were going through a perfectly stereotyped, conventional, and uninspired rigmarole. As no one knew who I was, I had an opportunity to see how cranky a new idea seems unless it is advanced by a well-known person. I suggested that, instead of founding just another society, they give a little thought to how they could use their theory to predict the kind and size of society they wanted, what its laws of growth and articulation with other parts of the scientific community should be. I was slapped down without mercy. Of all the silly ideas, to apply the ideas on the basis of which a society was being formed to ITSELF!

It seems to me that in a new organization, centered upon our knowledge and interest in circular self-corrective systems and our capacity to deal with the situations to which they may be productively applied, it might be worthwhile for this combination of old and new to really consider, technically and carefully, what in thunder we are founding. How many members do we want and from what groups should they be chosen? Maybe it would be well to consider from what groups they should not be chosen. How are we going to keep from getting steadily older, so that ten years from now young men will not want to join a society of people with whom they can't communicate? How are we going to keep our communication system alive? Or should we plan for the society to die in ten years? Recognizing that one is working in new and possibly transient fields, one can set a terminal date even at inauguration. (Like any contract, of course, such a date can be extended.) It is possible to say: let's aim at a short, definite period. We know what we want to do now and we think we can do it. The membership that we are going to bring in are the people to do what needs to be done. We are certain that we are not leaving our any of the people who ought to be here now. Why can't we look at this society systematically as a system with certain requirements, certain possibilities of growth, and certain constraints, in a world which is making demands, to some of which this society is to be responsive. If this society is to pay attention to the way cybernetics is developing in other countries, especially in the Soviet Union and other countries of the Eastern European block, what are the devices for adequate cross-national and cross-ideological communication? Do we have the right people? Do we have the necessary techniques? When are we likely to need either death or transformation?

I think these are questions which the American Society for Cybernetics should ask, and, as I am not disguised as a casual crank in Atlanta, I commend them to you.

*Mead, M (1968) Cybernetics of Cybernetics, in Foerster, H von, White, J, Peterson, L and Russell, J (eds) (1968) <u>Purposive Systems</u>, New York, Spartan Books