BOOK REVIEW

Media ecology, Neil Postman’s legacy

Mapping media ecology. Introduction to the field, by Dennis G. Cali, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2017, 282 pp., $49.58, ISBN: 978-1433127632

Let’s start with the title. It is a programmatic statement that is eloquent in itself: we find it necessary to draw the map of Media Ecology. Indeed, the world of communication has become an almost inextricable forest, in which we must identify roads and paths in order to be able to explore it to some extent. In our era in which ‘machines learn from other machines’, the media multiply their branches in every direction, not only by expanding communication technologies (hardware), but by exponentially multiplying applications (software). Or rather, the various communication technologies interact with the human species and now even constitute a set of prostheses in continuous expansion.

And here lies the whole originality of the reflection and research of Dennis D. Cali: he tries not only to trace an overall ‘map’ of this transformation in a descriptive way, but also with the ethical intent of an ecological purpose, which means studying the balances that can make this change useful for the development of future humanity. It is no coincidence that the word ‘ecology’ also belongs eminently to the physical universe of the planet. There is an increasingly close interdependence between climate change and media change. The first concerns the physical evolution of the planet, the second its symbolic superstructure, made up of communication technologies.

Right in the first pages of his study, Professor Cali offers us the different keys to reading the Ecology of Media, divided into seven points, almost like the days of the creation of the world.

1. Media Ecology as a metaphor. Taking up a thought from Carlos A. Scolari, Media Ecology contributes to preserving and repairing the world with respect to the image damage that the media (today we think of social media above all) can cause.¹
2. Media Ecology as a theory of groups, as a field of investigation in which to apply the work of scholars and professionals who work in the field of communications, always seeking a balance between various components.
3. Media Ecology as a bibliography, that is, as a compilation of sources, which can be used to identify the authors who, over time, have given and give the most significant contributions of thought.
4. Media Ecology as a study of environments, that is, a study of the contexts in which communication is processed, based on McLuhan’s intuition that each new medium, more or less, perceptibly changes the overall picture.
5. Media Ecology as a metaphor for evolution, able to be understood as a collection of social interrelations stimulated by interpretative ideas of change in the field of technology, culture, and our own consciousness.
6. Media Ecology as a perspective, because there is no future project that does not require the balance of ever more numerous and complex factors, both substantial and symbolic.
7. Media Ecology as a **discipline**, since it is necessary that both in the formation and in the research a method is established for the harmonious and ethical composition of all the elements available.

**The differing approaches to media ecology in America and Europe**

It is precisely this last aspect, discipline that inevitably leads us to refer to Neil Postman, the founder and master of Media Ecology as a subject that today has become an important field of study. Media Ecology was born in 1971, a key year in the field of communication. Yet today, 15 years after the death of its founder in 2003 at the age of 72, the well-known professor of New York University has still not received the recognition he deserves in Europe. Overseas, on the other hand, Postman’s death was followed by a flurry of research in the wake of his thinking. Just think, in parallel with the publication of this issue of *Church, Communication & Culture* (June 2019), there is taking place in Toronto—not surprisingly, at the university where Marshall McLuhan, with whom Postman had a great affinity, taught—a world congress of the ‘Media Ecology Association’, an organization created specifically to develop Neil Postman’s approach. It is an approach that is intrinsically combined with the ethics of the media, as can be seen from the title of the Association’s last conference: ‘Media Ethics: Human Ecology in a Connected World’.

This systemic approach, as we said, was born and flourished on the New Continent. Fortunately, however, the gap in European mediology reflection is partially filled by the updated edition of the fundamental work by Neil Postman on Media Ecology, published in New York in 1979 with the title *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, to emphasize the relationship between media practice and theoretical media training. It’s an approach that led Postman to establish an interesting comparison between school curriculum and media curriculum. The new edition of this book also represents an initiative towards contact and fundamental dialogue between the two sides of the Atlantic, bringing together two schools of thought between Europe and America that for too long have walked on separate paths and still have insufficient dialogue.

In this sense, the diffusion on the Old Continent of the thought of Dennis D. Cali can and must become the occasion for a meaningful contact and a commonality of research that today proves to be absolutely necessary. We ‘Europeans’ must, in fact, ask ourselves why these research orientations develop above all on the other side of the Atlantic. The answer is quite obvious: that continent escapes the ideological temptations that often characterize ‘old’ Europe. American pragmatism allows for grasping today’s trends in their spontaneous dynamics, without superimposing on them preconceived and binding interpretations, anchored in 19th and 20th-century patterns and preoccupied with expressing a judgment rather than following the phenomena in their factual progress and studying and correcting them step by step, without patterns of pre-judgment.

This is also matched by the flexibility of university regulations and the interdisciplinary nature of reflection and research. Our culture has exaggerated the organization of knowledge according to rigidly disciplinary patterns, or rather ‘many well-made languages’, as Condillac (1714–1780) said. Thus, by identifying rigid scientific-disciplinary sectors, which, though they allow university careers to be planned along known paths nevertheless fossilize knowledge, our academic culture penalizes those scholars who are oriented to grasping the connections—that is, what unites more than what separates.
In this regard, the Pope’s Message of 2019 for the 53rd Day of Social Communications is striking. It was written on the theme: ‘We are members of one another. From social media communities to human communities’, which addresses the central issue of contemporary society.

**Media ecology: a definition**

As we have seen, the concept of Media Ecology touches on many topics. For example, Lance Strate, founder and former editor of the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology*, proposed the following definition of Media Ecology:

> It is the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs. Media ecology is the Toronto School, and the New York School. It is technological determinism, hard and soft, and technological evolution. It is media logic, medium theory, mediology. It is McLuhan Studies, orality-literacy studies, American cultural studies. It is grammar and rhetoric, semiotics and systems theory, the history and the philosophy of technology. It is the postindustrial and the postmodern, and the preliterate and prehistoric.

But, following in the footsteps of Dennis Cali, we return to Postman to try to identify some fundamental points of his intellectual legacy that remain very current and rich in perspectives.

**Three key points: media ecology, leisure time management, and the risk of the technopolis**

First, he is credited with being the founder of media ecology, which he first chartered teaching at New York University and then taught the rest of his life. At that point, the current sensitivity for the problem of the physical conservation of the planet had not yet appeared in all its drama. Much less the issue of balance in the sphere of media, such that media could be an instrument for development and not—to use a prophetic expression of Marshall McLuhan—as if it were ‘guns aimed at our temples’. Postman went even further, sensing that the equilibrium of the physical sphere undermined by climate change should correspond to a balance in the sphere of media, as a consequence of the intimate and profound correspondence between the real and the virtual that was already manifested and that today appears in all his evidence. For example, the relationship between young and old belongs to this scope, with the singular observation that the expansion of the media universe does not correspond to the greater intergenerational dialogue that one would have expected, but on the contrary exaggerating opposing positions: the media consumption of adolescents deviates more and more from that of adults and vice versa. Here is another point at which media ecology is called upon to suggest the necessary remedies.

A second reason, for which Postman deserves not only to be remembered, but to be energetically revived today, lies in his exposition of the risk that contemporary man is running more and more towards ‘having fun to death’. In other words, the risk that the Fordist slavery to machines will be succeeded by a much more subtle slavery to hard-earned leisure time. Even today, of course, of the seven billion people that populate the planet, only a portion can say that they have liberated themselves in sufficient measure from the physical weight of work. But it is also true that the advanced bit of our global society that has gained this condition and to which we Westerners belong now, understands that we must confront
the new pitfall of evasion and the spectacularization of so-called free time, with all the transgressions and negativity that comes with it: an impressive fall from meaning and ideals, a profound rupture of the relationship between man and nature and, in practice, a search for evasion that is the conquest ground of every form of consumerist speculation. This evolution concerns, above all, the youth’s world, captured and dazzled by the beams of light of the great stadium concerts and stunned by the sound systems of the clubs. So the Postman hyperbole unfortunately comes true in the individual deaths from excessive behaviors when partying or in other tragedies like the suicidal path of the atrocious game ‘Whale’ conveyed by social networks.

A third reason that should revive Postman’s thought is given by his further reflection on what he called the ‘technopolis’, that is the contemporary form of every human aggregate. On his last trip to Italy, Neil Postman left us a warning precisely on this point:

I purposely used the word Tecnopoli to indicate a culture in which the goals that survive are those that the technology itself can make us achieve. We ask ourselves only the questions that technology can answer; we only propose to ourselves the problems that technology can solve. Tecnopoli manifests itself as a form of totalitarianism in which tradition, religion, and rituals are considered reactionary and useless old irons to be wiped out on the basis of the triumphal march of technological progress. In the Technopolis, people are considered above all as consumers and the “markets.” People believe that fast is better than slow, that new is better than old, that more is better than less; and, if people can’t get this, then they are forced to rethink the meaning of the word “better.” This can lead to a heartless and spiritually degraded culture …

The American scholar continued, asking us these questions:

Does this happen in Italy too? Are Italian children also trained to become consumers and idolize technology? Have they also begun to believe that paradise can be conquered through technological progress? And that all problems can be solved through sophisticated products? And that all that can be done should be done? If the answer is affirmative, then it is very important that the politicians, the educated, and the journalists focus their attention seriously on the problem of the Tecnolopoli, so that the citizen begins to understand what is at stake.5

**School and media, a dialogue to be restored**

Yet another one of Postman’s greatest achievements was that of putting the media world and the school world in close correlation, outlining their deep and necessary connections. We have unfortunately separated these two realities, with the consequence, among other things, of allowing a progressive and almost absolute dominion of the communication on formation and the loss of prestige and function of those who dedicate themselves to the education of young people. In his homeostatic conception of society, Postman was constantly in search of a positive relationship between the two terms, so as to assure the generations that the appropriate balance between conservation and innovation is gradually taking place. Conservation is here understood as a continuous rediscovery of one’s own roots and maintenance of values that often came at a high cost via those who preceded us, from antiquity to the present. Innovation is understood as the ability to experience the change necessary to make us protagonists of our time. ‘Teaching’, said Postman, ‘is an eminently conservative activity of our culture’, and in this sense constitutes the reassuring basis for the exploration of the future. In other words, we must ensure the cultural groundwork. But for this to happen we need formation and communication to have equal dignity, fighting
the danger that the latter will belittle or even mock the first. Among other things, this makes teachers minor league characters with respect to the ‘celebrity system’ the media has created. Needless to say, this battle is current and extremely difficult, for example, consider the wide and growing economic inequalities between the world of education and the entertainment world: just think of what happens in the field of football and professional sports in general. In hindsight, it is the same process that leads to the concentration of financial wealth at the expense of the equitable distribution of resources.

The school, precisely the environment eminently destined to welcome young people and form them for life, hosts them (when they do not abandon it) but does not ‘understand’ them, and has a terrible difficulty talking to them.

And it is here that the importance of the contribution of thought and action offered by Neil Postman enters the picture. He has developed two parallel tables: the school curriculum on the one hand and the curriculum of the media on the other. To the extent that they overlap, the school fulfills its educational mission. Insofar as they are strangers to each other, the school fails.

As Giovanni Vinciguerra wrote in the magazine Tuttoscuola on the occasion of Postman’s passing, “It was no accident that Neil Postman had begun to learn about the world of school, and above all the world of childhood, by becoming a teacher in elementary school. He then began an intense academic pursuit, lasting more than forty years, without ever forgetting his first experience of the richness of the human relationship, of the interaction that is established between student and teacher. For this reason he looked with suspicion at the intrusiveness of new media: the TV, but also the computer, perceived as a cause of isolation, social segregation, and massification of thought. In his most famous book, The Disappearance of Childhood (1981), Postman described the process of early transformation of children into “small adults” due to their exposure, from the earliest years of life, to the same kind of information reserved for adults, through the mass communication system: TV, advertising, models, fashion, conduct. The arrival of video games and the Internet has only made “adultized” children and adults even more similar, maintained in turn in a state of maturity never fully reached by the new pressure of the economic and communicational system.

Only the school, according to Postman, could remedy this situation, but on the condition of rediscovering its authentic purpose: to bring people, feelings, and thoughts together. As for new media, it is necessary to educate about technologies, and not with technologies, which otherwise would end up taking over content, as prophesied by Marshall McLuhan. Fundamentally, according to Postman, reading and strong mastery of one’s mother tongue remain even more important than foreign languages and new computer languages. A thesis, this, that it would be wrong to consider traditionalist, anti-modern: the subject’s autonomy, critical thinking, the ability to “read” the media without being dominated, are naturally oriented towards the future.6

However, the American author did not stop to report a risk, he also indicated a method to reconcile the two instances. In practice, he compared those he called the two curricula, the school and the media.

He was referring mainly to the effects of television. Today, recovering his approach, it is also possible to define the social curriculum: enticing and non-punitive – centered on emotion – centered on the present – centered on the image – centered on narration – it favors the isolation of a fictitious personal relationship – allows and exalts anonymity, encouraging the de-empowerment of subjects and attitudes of unpunished offense – the illusion of participating in a group – flattering independence – disapproving of authority, yet substantially authoritarian in promoting fashions, behaviors, and products – continuous over time
– insulating in space – discontinuous in content – immediately gratifying – unfaithful in the long run – it enhances horizontality by excluding vertical value and transcendent thought.

As you can see, in each of these matters, social media appears almost diametrically opposed to the school curriculum, which, to refer back to a definition by the philosopher Pietro Prini, necessarily presents itself as a ‘cloistered’ experience, which must therefore invite reflection, calmness, and discernment to get young people to think critically. In any case, the quote from St. Augustine: *Quod bonum est tenete* [Keep what is good] is more valid now than ever and can indicate the connecting link between media and school that constitutes a path that many teachers already take with intelligence and will.

Far from hypothesizing a progressive decline of the school’s role, with Postman we must say that it becomes increasingly necessary to help young people find their way in this globalized and increasingly interconnected world.

It is not by chance that the deepest connection between Postman—and therefore also Dennis D. Cali—and Marshall McLuhan, is with particular reference to McLuhan’s milestone books *The Mechanical Bride*, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and *Understanding Media*. The points of contact between the two scholars are profound, above all because of their sensitivity about the role of communication in social change in progress, overcoming the hurdles that do not allow us to comprehend all of the forces that impact the global village and affirming a transcendent vision of the media, both in the Christian identification of McLuhan and in the Jewish one of Postman.

Another author who connected the two was Walter Ong, in particular with his essay on *Orality and Literacy* (1982). As well, both owed a particular debt to Eric Havelock, who, in his *Preface to Plato* (1963), interpreted the passage from the time of the poets to the time of the philosophers in ancient Greece, as determined by the invention of writing. Other cultural references go to Harold Innis, who probed the relationship between politics and communication in his *Empire and Communication* (1950), as well as the historian Elisabeth Eisenstein with her work *The printing press as an agent of change: communications and cultural transformations in early modern Europe* (1979).

These are some of the intellectual and scientific interconnections attributed to Postman by Dennis D. Cali. However, there is another non-explicit connection, which we want to recall because, in our opinion, it may be quite significant. We refer to the work of the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), which, not by chance, set the premises for identifying a link between physical ecology and media ecology. We refer to the evolution of Creation represented by concentric spheres ranging from the lithosphere, that is the material crust of the Planet, to the biosphere, that is the habitat of life, to then go towards the noosphere, where the circulation of knowledge takes place and, arriving at our time, up to the technosphere, consisting of the technologies that support the transfer of information. It is easy to superimpose many passages of Postman’s thought on this evolution, up to and including his more mature conception of *Technopoly*.

Notes
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Gianpiero Gamaleri

*gamaleri@alice.it*

*International Telematic University Uninettuno, Rome, Italy*

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