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Professional Resource:

The Media Ecosystem: What Ecology Can Teach Us About Responsible Media Practice

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The Media Ecosystem: What Ecology Can Teach Us about Responsible Media Practice, by Antonio López (2012). Evolver Editions: Berkeley, CA.

Throughout its relatively young history, media literacy practitioners have asserted the importance of critical engagement with the media. Practitioners have argued that full participation in democratic citizenship necessitates a citizenry capable of critically "reading" and deconstructing media texts. At the same time, differences in the approach to media pedagogy have divided the field, separating those who emphasize textual analysis from those who privilege analyses of institutional, social and political power (Lewis and Jhally 1998). More recently, Kellner and Share (2005) differentiate between the traditionalist "protectionist" model, that saw media primarily as potentially damaging, from the media literacy movement that seeks to teach skills of analysis and decoding. They also describe "media arts" and "critical media literacy" models, both of which emphasize the expressive potential of media. With *The Media Ecosystems*, Antonio López extends the debate further, proposing a new vision of media education grounded in ecological consciousness. He borrows ideas from ecology and systems thinking, and foregrounds an ethics of collectivity, empathy and democracy. Steeped in metaphors of gardening, permaculture, and cultural commons, he elaborates a media practice that expresses a "green cultural citizenship" and calls for media educators to join in enlivening a media ecosystem.

While his earlier book, *Mediacology*, was aimed primarily towards media educators, *The Media Ecosystem* addresses a wider public, and does so in the mode of a manifesto appropriate to the sense of urgency many readers will feel about the impact of humans on the earth. López has a knack for synthesizing a wide range of ideas, from grassroots activist philosophers to Gregory Bateson, Vandana Shiva and Henry Jenkins to media "hactivists." This book would be an excellent core text for an undergraduate media literacy course, and should also be inspiring and useful to citizen journalists, media activists, community organizers, as well as media scholars concerned with transforming a media ecosystem that has become increasingly colonized by corporate centers of power.

López contends that environmental literacy and media literacy have by and large avoided crossing paths. He approaches environmental concerns and the study of media as a project of integration, coining the term "mediasphere" to describe the media as a system that functions in relationship with biological ecosystems. The first two chapters lay down the framework of ecological intelligence and the world systems perspective through which López develops the idea of the "media ecosystem." Drawing on Vandana Shiva's vision of *Earth Democracy*, López paints the media in relation to a series of spheres--the biosphere, the *noosphere* (Teilard de Chardin's term for collective unconscious), the *semiosphere* (signs and symbols), the *ethnosphere* (Wade Davis' term for cultural and linguistic diversity). López proposes that the *mediasphere* blends all these ideas into "a mediated cultural commons that facilitates planetary communications" (Kindle Location 74). He articulates a holistic understanding of "green cultural citizenship" that reinvigorates the ancient idea of *anima mundi*—world spirit—and highlights the need to recognize the aliveness and the generosity of the earth. Green cultural citizenship is the practice of an organic media ethics rooted in the sacredness of life, creative commons, participatory culture, transparent, trustworthy communication and diversity of voices,

reciprocity and cooperation.

In his earlier book, *Mediacology*, López advanced a critique of the first generation of media literacy that relied on a conceptual framework focussing on the damaging effects of media. What became known as the 'hypodermic needle theory' of media assumed a unidirectional flow of information and the power of media to affect mass audiences. Though the framework, popular in the 30's, has been criticized as deterministic and fallen out of favor, López finds remnants of the model in mainstream U.S. approaches to media literacy, and argues that this approach often has the unfortunate result of overwhelming students and viewers with heavy doses of negative stereotypes, media manipulation and misrepresentation of marginalized people. López demonstrates that new media practices are infused with more solutions-oriented thinking and a world-making framework that embraces participatory culture, a sharing economy and the generosity of a cultural commons. *The Media Ecosystem* elaborates on this distinction, exploring in greater specificity both the legacy of a colonial worldview present in the media oligarchy of today as well as examples of solutions. López's brief history of mass media highlights the progression from the one-to-many variety of mass communication to the more participatory landscape of social and emergent media of today. He is quite optimistic about the proliferating possibilities to disrupt the persistent hold of the media cartels.

The second chapter looks at the media in relation to world systems and globalization, describing the reach of neoliberalism and the workings of hegemony. López's discussion of the fan culture surrounding the ABC series, *Lost* (2004-2010), illuminates a key moment in the transition from traditional broadcast media to strategies of emergent media. While the *Lost* series was offered as a traditional television show, its showing coincided with the launch of social media and rise of iTunes. While López sees great potential in fan culture, he admits that it may not yet exemplify any real break from the stronghold of top down, high budget, centralized model of traditional media.

López's abilty translate complex ideas into an accessible form is apparent in his discussion of hegemony and the perpetual cycle of cooptation by which popular media normalizes dissent. Thus Fox broadcasts a show like *The Simpsons*, which regularly satirizes Fox News, in order to provide a level of release for social discontent; "corporate media are very adept at channeling the anxieties and tensions within society." *The Simpsons* then commissioned Banksy to produce a title sequence, which in turn lampooned the animation industry and toy tie-ins that feed *The Simpsons* franchise. This discussion also underscores the contradictions of "participation" in a world largely colonized by corporate media. Google and Facebook easily create the illusion of democratic participation while they mine the data of everyday people's media usage, sneakily finding a way to get users to not only "commodify our consciousness" but serve it up for the profit of media cartels (25). He links the marginalization of ecological intelligence to colonization and consciousness of conquest that undergrids Western culture. López refers to the comparison he made in *Mediacology* of the central symbols of Western culture and indigenous—the cross or grid and the medicine wheel. In this volume he more explicitly draws on analysis of colonialism by Franz Fanon and others, in addition to references to bioregionalism.

The third chapter asks what does the media teach us—not only in terms of content, but in terms of how to think. The media serve a "teacher function," argues López, but the way that it teaches is informal, unlike schooling. We learn from the media in our homes, from the couch, in moments when our guard is down. In this informal social setting, we are trained to care about some things and not so much about others. Our susceptibility to being schooled in this way was much more prevalent before the internet. Here López expands on Vandana Shiva's idea of monoculture of the mind, adaptating the agricultural model of monocropping to examine the worldview that shapes cultural systems. He calls this the "mini-mart of the mind." The media system has been toxified by the mini-mart diet; like damaged organic ecosystems, the media ecosystem needs remediation, and a process of remediation must address the "interlocking colonial practices of the world system and its manipulation of media..." With the internet and social media, the mediasphere has become much more of an open system with many entry points for green citizens to participate.

The two central chapters aim to envision what it would take to shift the present consciousness of monoculture and technological determinism to one based on empathy and resonance. López believes that a mechanistic worldview underlies most media activism and media scholarship. An important agenda of his approach is to challenge the Cartesian, dualistic

thinking and champion the "affective economy," the need for emotional well-being and empathy. He feels that the media have a great potential to facilitate empathy across diverse "linguacultures." López attempts to flesh out the ecosystem metaphor, looking at media ecotones and how community media can act as productive disturbances to the corporate-dominated world system. His discussion of the Palestinian appropriations of the Na'vi people in *Avatar*, the 2009 film, is a fascinating example. The film text itself was opposed by indigenous people for its reinforcement of the master narrative of white savior rescuing victimized indigenous people. However, in the mediasphere generated by online discussions, fan culture, and international news reports, the Na'vi became a meme that Palestinian protesters could appropriate and deploy to resist the narrative of terrorism.

The last chapter includes a celebratory inventory of successful activist, ecomedia initiatives such as Annie Leonard's partnership with Free Range Studio to produce the "Story of Stuff," 350.org and Bill McKibben, Rising Voices work with Citizen Media and Underrepresented Languages, Out of Your Backpack and indigenous youth media, and Open Source Ecology, to name a few. Taking up Bill McKibben's recommendation for media communities to follow the example of farmer's markets to form a media equivalent of them, López attempts to elaborate a media permaculture and "slow media" movement akin to the "slow food" movement. He advocates for strategies of culture jamming, hactivism, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) sharing, self organization and curation, net neutrality and media justice.

The Media Ecosystem represents an important bridge between media literacy, ecocriticism and environmental education. López's work breaks new ground in advancing the decolonial framework and linking it with an ecosystem approach to media literacy. In the field of ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism is a growing body of literature. However, postcolonial discourse continues to suffer from a certain insularity in its discipline-specific language and inability to translate ideas such as "alerity," "subaltern" and "epistmology" to a wider audience. López is a brilliant code switcher and adept translator of complex ideas able to make this translation with ease. I particularly like his invention of the term, "glocalize" to describe the complex ways that local activism is making connections to global consciousness. His interdisciplinary approach to media education is urgently needed.

However, the book falls short in its lack of indigenous voices and in López's reliance on ideas of "Jeffersonian" democracy. López advocates for inclusion of multiple voices, and refers frequently to indigenous worldviews (Traditional ecological knowledge or TEK, Hopi symbology, etc.). While López aspires to show great respect for indigenous knowledge, especially for the community in which he taught media literacy, he does not actually include their voices. Since multiplicity of voices is a principle he advocates for, it seems curious that he would not have found a way to make a space for multiple voices. In the last chapter of the book, López frames his advocacy for the media literacy in terms of cultivating a Jeffersonian democracy. His appraisal, even exaltation of, Jeffersonian democracy could stand a more nuanced critical engagement, especially given recent scholarship on Jefferson. Peter S. Onuf demonstrates in *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* that both historical and contemporary critics have pointed to Jefferson's ambivalent attitudes towards slavery and Native American sovereignty, revealing contradictions inherent in his nation- building project, "an empire of liberty" dependent on slave labor and dispossession of indigenous land.

The Media Ecosystem is a lively read and energizing text full of inspiring resources and rich provocations for new mediacological practices. In combination with readings on ecology and environmental activism, López's book would serve well as the primary text for an interdisciplinary course on media and sustainability education.

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