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BOOK REVIEW

Ecomedia Literacy: Integrating Ecology into Media Education

By Pamela Pereyra, MediaSavvyCitizens.com

López, Antonio. *Ecomedia Literacy: Integrating Ecology into Media Education*. Routledge, 2020.

If it were a marketing campaign, it would have a series of slogans that say something like “Did you know media come from the environment?” or “How come media literacy missed acknowledging ecology?” or “It’s about time we undress the ecological impacts of media” or “media education + sustainability = media environmental consciousness.” Fortunately, it’s not a marketing campaign because it cannot be boiled down to one thing. The book *Ecomedia Literacy: Integrating Ecology into Media Education* is a long-overdue deep study into and expansion of the emerging field of ecomedia literacy, which unites inquiry of systemic structures with analytical tools of ecomedia studies.

The author, Dr. Antonio López, department chair and associate professor of Communications and Media Studies at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy, experienced k-16 educator, shows the audience how to reconceptualize and teach media, and offers a wealth of information, historical context, new ways of understanding, and practical tips and strategies for effectively teaching ecomedia literacy with examples leading with inquiry. Taking the reader on a journey from theory to practice, the book is a leading-edge approach to broaden the understanding of the ecological crisis in relation to media, applying systems thinking and new ways of analysis using the ecomediasphere.

Published in 2021, *Ecomedia Literacy* could not have come at a better time as educators re-imagine education, how, and what they teach. Both university and K-12 educators could use the book and its concrete examples in planning and curriculum design. While there is ample room for expanding the teaching chapter into a book, it does a good job at initiating educators to the foundational concepts with examples and ideas for teaching approaches. One foundational concept revolves around the term ecomedia. Ecomedia reframes media as part of the environment and in changing the term, provides space for reflection in the naming and in how media is conceived.

The book is organized into an introduction and three sections forming eleven chapters, allowing the reader to digest the information thematically. My reading strategy was to start with the visuals, followed by the teaching section, then the introduction and ending with the theory (parts 1 and 2). It was an approachable way to digest the information.

In the introduction, Dr. Lopez follows the systems dynamics approach for solving ecological problems, which requires a beneath the surface study of knowledge systems producing the problems: “[a]ddressing the deepest level ... to design new systems that can grapple with the predicament” (16). Using the iceberg model of systems thinking graphic on page 17, the author applies the example of fake climate news as the Event, describing how ecomedia literacy involves deconstructing a media text (such as an article, video, etc.); reviewing the Patterns/Trends of sources and distribution; exploring Systemic Structures, such as economic motives of individuals and/or platforms; and examining Mental Models (worldview/ideology), such as extractivism or anthropocentrism at the deepest level driving the system. Systems thinking philosophy asserts that problems are unsolvable with the same thinking that created them and, therefore, a deeper study allows a person to comprehend how and why it functions within a broad structure. The graphic explains much more than what I provide, but for the sake of brevity, it is explained in a simplistic way.

Part 1 sets the stage of the problem by exploring the historical perspectives on worldviews that shaped current thinking. It expands the ecological and media theoretical framework. The author describes that media ecosystems “are not natural but are the result of deliberate choices and shared values” (112), which is a good foundation to understand the human impact. The book explains how media studies have concentrated on studying texts and not so much on the context outside of the text, supplying an opportunity to see the gaps in big-picture connections and reconceptualize media as ecomedia objects, situated in an ecomedia system open to intervention.

Part 2 is where Dr. Lopez explains in-depth ecomedia literacy, how to take it apart with components that make up the innovative ecomediasphere that is the basis for deconstruction, much like we know the five media literacy questions of traditional media literacy. The ecomediasphere is impressively boiled down to one easy-to-understand graphic. At the center sits the object of deconstruction being studied by four lenses and zones in the form of a cross: Ecoculture (social & cultural practices), Political Ecology (political & economic forces), Ecomateriality (medium properties and the physical environment), and Lifeworld (cognitive dispositions and affect). Circling the zones are shared ideas that further synthesize the relationship between two zones: Ecoculture & Political Ecology study ideology; Political Ecology and Ecomateriality review platform design; Ecomateriality and Lifeworld explore affordances/constraints; and Lifeworld and Ecoculture analyze beliefs.

Part 3 is ecomedia literacy in practice and serves as a curriculum guide for educators. Dr. Lopez opens the section with a justification of his thinking and sets the stage for the work ahead getting readers on board. The premise is that students will need a cultural, social, political, and economic understanding to accompany their technical skills. He proceeds to model how to incorporate those understandings with deconstructions of ecomedia objects, such as a movie and a gadget using the ecomediasphere. For curriculum development, he discusses applying the Wiggins & McTighe’s Understanding by Design model of backward designing to drive inquiry, outcomes,

and assessment. He explains how to use the ecomediasphere as a design tool to guide learning and perform analysis on ecomedia objects, such as a text, gadget, platform, or hyperobject. Acknowledging the understanding that what he proposes can be complex, the author simplifies the language for younger students to “culture, economy, environment and experience for the ecomediasphere zones” (p.263). Having launched many semester-long ecomedia studies courses, he shares valuable lessons learned, such as students confusing ecocentric as anti-human with an explanation to clarify. In *The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy*, Scheibe and Rogow state that media literacy education is “an ever-evolving continuum of skills, knowledge, attitude and actions” (2012, p.55). Will the ecomediasphere become part of 21st-century media education as media literacy education evolves?

The author introduces the ecomediasphere graphic on page 200, taking 199 pages to lay out relationships and deconstruct various concepts in Ecology, Economy, Ecosystem, Communications, Environmental Discourse, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Media Literacy, Systems Thinking, Modernity, Anthropocentric vs. Ecocentric, Semiotics, etc. and introduce the reader to concepts, such as Ecomedia, Ecomedia Studies, Ecomedia Literacy, Ecomedia Footprint, and Ecomedia Mindprint. The pages leading up to page 200 synthesize interdisciplinary work that bring various fields of study together. It is a herculean effort to get a lay reader up to speed on all of them, by leaving behind old thought processes, embracing a new way of thinking and then conceptualizing how to teach about media, media literacy and media studies situated in ecology. As Maxwell and Miller state, “understanding the media requires studying them up, down and sideways ... [and] also need an anthropological gaze ... to comprehend” (*Greening the Media*, 2012, p.17). This book does just that. It puts media literacy into a broader historical context of current education practices and beliefs about technology and progress while setting the stage for how to incorporate the environment into media literacy. The extended section on theory helps readers conceptualize and evaluate media literacy’s foundations in which it operates--modernity--, which promotes technological progress and industrial growth. That study opens the door for reconceptualization of teaching and learning about media and media literacy situated in the environment.

The author states the reasoning and urgency in the aim of ecomedia literacy, “to promote mindfulness for how everyday media practice impacts our ability to live sustainably within Earth’s ecological parameters for the present and future” (p. 27). In a disposable world, where objects are designed not to last and fields of study have taken the environment for granted, the book pioneers an expansive way to be inclusive of the environment and guides teaching media studies in an innovative future-forward approach.

While it feels like the author is tangentially writing about too many topics that are off-topic, the book itself is looking at the interconnectedness of the whole, hence the introduction of systems thinking. Dr. Lopez was inclusive on the various topics in the field of media studies, he provides

plenty of room for a media teacher to apply ecomedia literacy based on their particular interests and foci.

Postman and Weingartner discuss how back in 1950, education reformer John Dewey wrote to Adelbert Ames, who was fairly unknown to many and studied optics and perception:

I think your work is by far the most important work in the psychological -philosophical field during this century - I am tempted to say the only important work. (Quoted in *Teaching as Subversive Activity*, 1961, p.91)

Similarly, when it comes to media education, I think Dr. Lopez' work is possibly one of the most important works in this century, merging fields of study and enabling readers to see the tangible connections between ecology and media while inviting them to ditch old ways of thinking about media and media education, to adopt new ideas and in turn, teach them for the sake of the environment and ethical progress.

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