

Author: Szklarek, Jacek.

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Jacek Szklarek

The Relevance of Language Education in the Age of New Media Technologies: A critical re-evaluation of Walter Ong's, Jacques Ellul's, and Neil Postman's communication system

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INTRODUCTION

Media criticism very often becomes a subjective and personal enterprise. Evaluating or appraising media quality and performance has become a popular enterprise for ordinary persons, academicians, and media people themselves. What makes a good newspaper, or TV program or magazine? "It is just a matter of opinion", we hear. The academic world is also spawning a torrent of media criticism, generally of a political nature. Another strain of criticism suggests that the American media are corrupted principally by wealthy media entrepreneurs who think more of profits and worker exploitation than they do about individual rights, dignity, and welfare. Other analysts of the media point to their sleazy nature, their negativism, their sensationalism, their catering to the lowest common denominator, and their callousness and general lack of ethics.

Certain consistent themes emerge from the general appraisal of the mass media in America. One of the most common is that media owners are too concerned with their own interests, too interested in making money, and not interested enough in public service. Some believe that advertisers are wielding too much influence on the media, or that a single socio-economic class controls the mass media and that the media are therefore basically conservative and tend to maintain the *status quo* which favors the wealthy. A related criticism is that media owners are united with the political leadership of the country and thus pull their punches when it comes to promoting any real change of American society¹.

Another criticism is that there is not enough diversity or competition in the mass media and that a monopolistic trend toward group or chain ownership, coupled with the high cost

1 Lowenstein R. & Merrill J., *Macromedia. Mission, message and morality*, New York – London: Longman 1990, p. 125-127.

of getting into the media business, is exacerbating this problem. Average citizens and certain minority groups simply do not have proper access to the media for the airing of their opinions and perspectives, say many contemporary media analysts.

There is also the characteristic of criticism of the media which argues that atypical, eccentric, and destructive persons and groups are given too much emphasis and that trivia, sensation, sex, and violence are getting undue, disproportionate, and unrealistic attention. While some observers of the media contend that they expose too much sensitive information about government, others maintain that the media are too timid and cautious in divulging information to the public.

Despite this diversity of opinions, Davis & Puckett suggest that it is possible to divide all American media and social criticism into two schools: conservative social criticism and reform criticism². Both schools were dedicated to social evolution, or progress, and both expressed concern about the unforeseen and sometimes tragic consequences of social changes associated with the appearance of modern and new media. Both recognized "that media had the ability to foment social unrest and disrupt local communities and the cultures on which they were based".³ However, the two schools offered radically different strategies for social development and its relation with the media. Conservatives favored strong elite control and the use of the media to disseminate those forms of "high" culture favored by them. Reform critics were more optimistic about democratic forms of politics and the ability of the media to create "great communities", in which new forms of mediated culture would be widely shared.

The idea of this dissertation is born from this unresolvable and scientifically unacceptable tension between these two media criticisms presented above. A more precise formation of a proper *status questionis* started already with our master's thesis on mass communication system in Neil Postman's media criticism.⁴ Because of the restricted possibilities and mostly presentational, not critical character of our previous work, at that time we were constrained to conclude with an ambiguous judgment of Postman's

2 Davis D. & Puckett T., *Mass entertainment and community: Toward a culture-centered paradigm for mass communication research*, in: Deetz S. (Ed.), *Communication yearbook/15*, Newbury Park-London-New Delhi: Sage Publication 1992, p. 4.

3 Ibid., p. 4-5.

4 Szklarek J., *The analysis of mass communication system in Neil Postman's media criticism*, (unpublished master thesis) Rome: Pontifical Salesian University 1994.

argument. Using the words of Postman's critics on the one hand, and on the other of his sustainers we pointed out that "in reading Postman one can at least take comfort from the fact that his credibility as cultural analyst and prophet is somewhat impaired by his striking ignorance of any type of media research over the last twenty years"⁵, and that, according to the opinion of scholars connected with the periodical *Et cetera*, he has achieved "international recognition as a major analyst and critic of contemporary education, politics, and culture".⁶ Which of these two opinions is true?

Our master's thesis has shown that Postman in his media criticism represents a conservative thought.⁷ Together with critics such as Ortega y Gasset and T. S. Eliot on the Right and the proponents of the Frankfurt School on the Left, Postman seems to accuse the media of being agents of barbaric culture. These critics argue that the social changes unleashed by industrialization would suddenly lower the standards of norms and values of communities rendering them vulnerable to manipulation by the media. By raising the specter of cultural decline, they hoped to mobilize reactionary movements and bring about a restoration of traditional social order. At the heart of the conservative view of media and society is a "distrust of average persons and a simplistic view of how a 'good' social order should be created and maintained. The Right saw a need for strong and stable social institutions (i.e., church, state, schools, business) that would assume dominant, paternalistic roles saving people from their own worst impulses and ignorance".⁸

However, in our previous work we have also noted that until 1985, when his book *Amusing ourselves to death* was published, Postman was practically unknown in the field of communication. The great editorial success of this book made him not only famous in America and in Europe but also gave him a name of "cultural Jeremiah".⁹ There are really very few people who know of his work before and after *Amusing ourselves to death*. For example, the most elaborated critique of Postman's media criticism presented by Joli

5 Skovmand M. & Schroder K. (Ed.), *Media cultures. Reappraising transnational media*, London-New York: Routledge 1992, p. 3.

6 Editorial text, *Et cetera* 2 (1994), p. 159.

7 Kelley P., "The use of television in public examinations", *Journal of Educational Television*, 2 (1993), p. 61.

8 Davis D. & Puckett T., *Mass entertainment and community: Toward a culture-centered paradigm for mass communication research*, p. 5. See also: Hallin D., "The passing of the "high modernism" of American journalism", *Journal of Communication* 3 (1992), p. 14-25.

9 Twitchell J., "Carnival culture: the trashing of taste in America", (J. Davies' book review) *Journal of Educational Television* 1 (1993), p. 47.

Jensen is limited only to this book, although he has written around thirty of them.¹⁰ It made clear that in the 70's and at the beginning of 80's Postman was known exclusively as an educationist. What we discovered among communication scholars was the ignorance of Postman's media education elaborated in *Teaching as a Subversing Activity* (1969) and especially in *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979).

Media education

Although a few scholars of communication agree on the precise nature and extent of the effects of electronic technologies on contemporary culture, there is widespread agreement that such media as print, film, radio, television, and computer have a major impact on the ways in which people learn about and come to understand their world.¹¹ Since the early 1960s, evidence about the time children spend with mass media such as television began to attract international attention and concern for its impact on their feelings, values, and social behavior. There has been increasing agreement among communication scholars, educators, parents, and community leaders that children should somehow be prepared by the schools to understand or respond critically to the mass media and their contents.¹² For the electronic media, this concern began with film and continued with radio, but never reached the intensity of the demand for media education triggered by the advent of television and then of computers. This demand has resulted mostly in the development of a variety of activities, programs, and curricula designed for use in the public schools to educate children.

The aim of media education has come to be referred to in current research as "media literacy", "media pedagogy", "media competency" or, as Postman wants, "media ecology". From Great Britain (Masterman) to Japan (Akiyama), from Italy (Giannatelli/Rivoltella) to Norway (Dahl), from Canada (Dancan/Pungente) to Australia (Canavan), from USA (Gerbner/Postman) to Germany (Baacke) the importance of media competency has long

10 Jensen J., *Redeeming modernity. Contradictions in media criticism*, Newbury Park-London-New Delhi: Sage Publication 1990, p. 44-50.

11 Salomon G., *Interaction of media, cognition and learning*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1979; Noelle-Neumann E., Schultz W. & Wilke J., *Publizistik/Massen-kommunikation*, Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag 1989; Singer D. & Singer J., *Learning how to be intelligent consumers of television*, in: M. Howe, *Learning from television*, London: Academic 1983, pp. 265-298; Gerbner G., Gross L., Signorelli N. & Morgan M., "Aging with television drama and conceptions of social reality", *Journal of Communication* 3 (1980), pp. 37-47. Harren P. & Hulsizer C., *The TV-smart book for kids. Action for children's television*, New York: Dutton 1986; Postman N., *The disappearance of childhood*, New York: Delacorte Press 1982.

12 Harren P. & Hulsizer C., *The TV-smart book for kids. Action for children's television*, New York: Dutton 1986; Postman N., *The disappearance of childhood*, New York: Delacorte Press 1982.

been recognized.¹³ Even though media education is a declared goal worldwide, it is still not precisely clear whether there is any consensus on what a child ought to know about a mediated world.¹⁴

Media ecology

In his article "The New Media Literacy" discussing the appropriateness of the name "media literacy", Postman indicates that the term "literacy" continuously changes as the meanings of communication change. He states there that "today literacy is the skill with which man manipulates the many media of communications".¹⁵ Therefore his proposal at this topic, Postman prefers to call "media ecology". The word "ecology" actually dates back to early Greek history. It derives from the Greek word *oikos*, which means household, home, or place to live: our living environment. Modern ecologists also, argues Postman, whether they are concerned with biological or sociological issues, are essentially interested in understanding the dynamics of change within environments, how environments interrelate, and how organisms relate to their environments. Underlining their inquiry is a concern to develop or promote healthy balanced environments. Media ecology, therefore, is the study of media as dynamic changing environments.¹⁶ Postman uses the term "media ecology" to stress the fact that communication is not a "thing" but an informational environment. Through its form, a communication system controls how we use our bodies, how we employ our senses, how we conduct our relations and how we conceive our knowledge. Media ecology, then, is the study of structures by which symbols affect human behavior.¹⁷

13 Masterman L., *Teaching the media*, London: Comedia 1985; Akiyama T., *Trends in research on Japan's educational broadcasts*, Tokyo: Japan Broadcasting Corporation 1986; Dahl A., *Tendencies in mass media-teaching and -education in Norway*, in: *Education and the media: Trends, issues, prospects*, Bonn: UNESCO 1983, pp. 83-111; Giannatelli R. & Rivoltella P., *Teleduchiamo. Linee per un use didattico della televisione*, Leumann: Elle Di Ci 1994; Giannatelli R. & Rivoltella P. (Eds.), *Le impronte di Robinson: Mass media, cultura popolare, educazione*, Leumann: Elle Di Ci 1995; Canavan K., *Media education in Australia*, in: *Education and the media: Trends, issues, prospects*, pp. 30-55.

14 An attempt to order the status of media education can be found in: Rivoltella P., *Mass media, educazione, formazione*, in: Masterman L., *A scuola di media: Educazione, media e democrazia nell'Europa degli anni '90*, Brescia, La Scuola 1997, p. 5-29. See also: Baacke D., *Qualitative Medienforschung*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1989.

15 Postman N., "The new media literacy", *Grade Teacher* 3 (1971), p. 28.

16 Postman N., *Teaching as a conserving activity*, New York: Delacorte Press 1979, p. 186.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 186

Throughout our previous work we have noted that Postman with his media ecology exclusively demands criticism based on *understanding* or on *knowing*. He does not see any need of "media didactic" – an education with media. This understanding or knowing as critical thinking depends first of all on the critical relationship to our language as our most fundamental tool of thinking and knowing. Thus, media ecology, according to Postman, finds both its theoretical foundation and practical application in language education critically and systematically conducted. Postman also argues that apart from strict interrelation between language, thought and knowledge the actual cultural context also plays an important role. According to him, despite the bias of our culture to non-linguistic communication, the teaching in the schools should place the strongest possible emphasis on language education.

Language education

Using the words of Derrick de Kerckhove we can say that for Postman "language is everywhere, language is everything".¹⁸ Postman suggests that we live in the world of words. Thanks to language we establish our relationship with the whole reality; we establish our "being-in-the-world" and our "being-with-ourselves". Because of this, for Postman it would be a misunderstanding to conceive of language as scores or even as skills. In his opinion language education is almost entirely irrelevant when conducted at the level of grammar exercises. Of all things to be learned, in school or out, languaging, as Postman prefers to call the process, is the most intimate, integrated, emotional-laden learning we do. It involves many aspects from at least such sciences as: cognitive studies, neurology, cultural studies, anthropology, studies on technology, sociology, media communication studies, and many branches of linguistics.

After this necessary introduction, we arrive at the point where we can present the idea and the purpose of our work.

I. The purpose

Keeping in mind the tension around Postman's media communication system – heavy criticism on the one hand and glorious appraisal on the other – we want to examine Postman's concept of language education, which, as our previous study has demonstrated, is central to and brings together Postman's main ideas on media

¹⁸ De Kerckhove D., "Language is everywhere, language is everything", interview of Szklarek J., appendix, p. 366.

communication, technology, knowledge and education. To facilitate our work and to situate Postman's thought in the field of media communication sciences, this examination will take the form of a confrontation of Postman's work with the work of other scholars who have been judged "worthy" and "representative" by their publications and by the discussions in the sciences represented by them. It is understandable that these sciences have to be directly correlated to Postman's language education. Nevertheless, because of the particular character of this thesis and because of limited individual possibilities, we are constrained to limit the "interested" sciences to the two of which are most fundamental and most complementary to language education. In our opinion these sciences are: media communication studies and studies on technology. Our choice in this case is motivated by following reasons:

1. Postman's language education is a consequence and an integral part of his *media ecology*.
2. The studies on media communication are related to many subjects from other sciences, and their interdisciplinarity nature offers a good correspondence with complexity of language studies.
3. Postman's tendency, especially in his later publications, to analyze language education in the context of the studies on media communication and on technology.
4. An increasing connection in our times between language, media communication and technology.

Not only the choice of the sciences but also the choice of representing the scholars is not free from significant difficulties. In order to achieve the greatest "compatibility" we have not only used the aforementioned conditions of being "worthy" and "representative" but also those that follow:

1. Not to consider media communication just as an isolated phenomenon and to accept that there is a significant interplay between the medium and the message.
2. Not to negate that language is something more than mere expression or mere communication and that, at least in some of its "modes of use", language depends on media communication technologies.
3. Not to use a methodology which is directly opposed to that of Postman (not quantitative).
4. Not to belong to the schools of media criticism or media education which are clearly opposed to those of Postman.
5. Not to share with Postman a similar philosophy of life.
6. Not to be present in Postman's work as an important "reference point".

All these conditions want to emphasize the convergence of the most basic concepts which are acknowledged by Postman and by the great majority of communication scholars and which, therefore, allow us to focus on the possible differences between Postman's language education and the related studies of the chosen scholars. In other words, we want to control Postman's communication system from inside and according to his own choice of scholars who are also considered as significant representatives in the disciplines which interest us.

According to our preliminary research there are at least four candidates who fulfill all our conditions. In the case of media communication studies we have found Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, while in the studies of technology Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul. All of these authors are strongly influential in the thought of Neil Postman and they are considered as important or as leading thinkers in the above mentioned fields. But we have decided to limit ourselves to Ong and Ellul. We exclude McLuhan because Postman's relationship to him has changed during the last thirty years. If at the beginning of the '70s Postman was fascinated by the work of McLuhan and, as the *Toronto Star* reported, considered Toronto (thanks also to McLuhan's presence there) to be a leader in school reform, during the '80s and '90s he has changed his opinion: "McLuhan, while an important contributor", writes Postman in his latest book, "was neither the first nor necessarily the best who has addressed the issue of how we become what we make".¹⁹

We also preferred Ellul to Mumford because of his focus on and interest in the relationship between technology and language. It is also significant that the analyses of Ellul are more recent than those by Mumford and correspond better with Postman's writings from the '80s and '90s.

At this point it should be useful to underline that the choice of Ong and Ellul serves to place, investigate and confront Postman's idea of language education with contemporary studies on communication and technology. Ong's and Ellul's guiding arguments will be presented in the context of and with reference to other writings on the subject which will serve to confirm and enlarge their analyses and perspectives. Nevertheless, the

¹⁹ Postman N., *The end of education: Redefining the value of school*, New York: Alfred Knopf 1995, p. 189-190. "In New York, Toronto is considered the centre of education reform, a leading critic of the American education system said yesterday. Neil Postman, professor at New York University, said this reputation probably has something to do with Marshall McLuhan, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the development here of free schools" ("Toronto considered the leader in school reform", *Toronto Star* October 8, 1970, p. 26).

respective references in the footnotes will assure the ability to recognize the original thoughts of Ong, Ellul, Postman and relate them to various other authors.

After these introductory explanations we can now formulate the hypothesis of our work. We begin our analyses with the conviction that the proposition of language education by Neil Postman is not sufficiently elaborated and that despite his claims Postman does not entirely follow the thought of Walter Ong and Jacques Ellul.

II. Biographical notes upon Ong, Ellul and Postman

1. **Walter Jackson Ong** (1912) from fourth grade on to his doctoral studies at Harvard, was under the tutelage of Catholic educators. After his graduation in Rockhurst College in 1933, he worked in the printing business. In 1935 Ong entered the Society of Jesus at the Missouri Province. After studies in English and in theology at Saint Louis University he completed his research in 1954 at Harvard University with his Ph.D. in English. He was named Professor of English in 1959 and Professor of Humanities in Psychiatry in 1970 and University Professor of Humanities in 1981 – all from Saint Louis University. Like Marshall McLuhan, who taught Ong at Saint Louis University in 1938-1941, his focus is the history – the technologizing and detechnologizing of the word. However, Ong's interest in orality-literacy contrasts, interactions and related developments did not stem directly from his contacts with McLuhan. Whereas McLuhan emphasized the historical shifts from the written word to the printed word and from the printed word to present-day electronic culture, Ong is more of a "primitivist". He concentrates on the earlier transformation from orality to literacy, in part by studying cultures that had no knowledge of writing at all and by associating the spoken word in oral cultures with action, power and unity.

During his long academic activity he continued his career on numerous fellowships, lectureships, and visiting professorships, all the while publishing nearly 400 articles, monographs, reviews, and books. He was made a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Academiques by the government of France and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In addition, 15 colleges and universities have conferred honorary degrees on him. Ong is also the only Catholic priest yet to be elected president of the Modern Language Association of America. He was advisory editor, member of editorial board and contributor to numerous journals including: *Manuscripta*, *Studies in English*

Literature, Philosophy and Rhetoric, America, Abstracts of English Studies, and English Literary Renaissance.

2. Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), author, professor, and former civic official, was educated at the University of Bordeaux and the University of Paris where he earned a doctorate in law. In 1937 he began his career in academia by taking a position as a lecturer at University of Montpellier. A year after he moved to the University of Strasbourg, Strasbourg and in 1946 he took the position of Professor of history of Law at the University of Bordeaux, where he also held other posts concurrently. Of the Reformed faith, Ellul was a consultant to the Ecumenical World Council of Churches (1947-1953) and also a member of the National Council of the Reformed Church in France. Alongside his spiritual life, Ellul participated in the civic life, serving as Deputy Mayor of Bordeaux (1944-1947).

In his analyses of technological society Ellul indicted the concept of *technique* as the force which would ultimately destroy humanity by completely overpowering man, taking him for its object, and thus becoming the center of society. His rather pessimistic description of technical civilization provoked a barrage of criticism from reviewers who rejected his thesis of the inevitability of man's destruction by technology. While the critics examine society and Ellul's critique in terms of the pragmatic concerns of autonomous man within his society, Ellul's perspective revolves around biblical revelation and acknowledges the transcendent God as the one who has the final word about man and his society. In fact, as Ellul confessed, his principal effort was to bring a new interpretation of the whole of modern society and to determine whether the Christian faith still has power in this society. As he pointed out, "one of my greatest disappointments is the extreme incapacity of Christians to intervene when situations are fluid and their habit of passionately taking sides when it is too late for anything but fate to operate. They are pushing a wheel of a vehicle that is already rolling downhill by itself".²⁰

Ellul has published around forty books and eight hundred articles. He also received many awards and honors. Among them it is enough to mention: Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, Officier de l'Ordre du Mérite, Grand Croix des Palmes Académiques, prize in history from l'Académie Française and Prix Veillon for best European essay for the year 1975.

²⁰ Ellul J., *A temps et a contretemps: Entretien avec Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange*, Paris: Le Centurion 1981 (*In season, out of season: An introduction to the thought of Jacques Ellul based on interviews by Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange*, trans. Niles L., San Francisco: Harper & Row 1982, p. 107).

3. Neil Postman (1931) is a critic, writer, communication theorist, and professor of communication arts and sciences at New York University where in 1971 he founded the first graduate program of media ecology in the whole world. Educated at the State University of New York and Columbia University from which he received a Doctorate in Education, Postman is being listened to both inside and outside universities. In addition to his scholarly research, he has advised cultural ministers in Europe and in 1976 he also taught a television course in communication studies on CBS's Sunrise Semester. From 1977 to 1986 Postman was the editor of *Et cetera*, the journal of general semantics. He describes himself as a cultural critic, a complainer, and a conscientious objector. Postman is very much a part of the Anglo-American tradition. Among his chief influences are John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Korzybski, and of course, Marshall McLuhan. Readers of this social theorist know that he is at once one of the sharpest critics and one of the good-tempered teachers. He is a critic who not only deplores the lowering of standards in our schools and on our airwaves, but suggests ways in which we can raise them again without being old-fashioned, reactionary, or indifferent to the concerns of youth. The 79th annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association in Miami Beach (November 18-21, 1993) was entitled "Communication, education, and culture: Perspectives on the scholarly activity of Neil Postman". Postman holds the Christian Lindback Award for Excellence in Teaching and in 1987 he was given the George Orwell Award for Clarity in Language by the National Council of Teachers of English. He is married and has three children, and lives in Flushing, New York. Many of Postman's around thirty books have been translated and published in different languages. Born of Jewish parents, Postman is Catholic.

III. The method

What we already have explained about the choice of investigated scholars and of the area for our research is extremely important for our methodology. At this point, we want to add that the research problem will be to identify areas of agreement or disagreement among selected communication scholars pertaining to the elements of language, communication, technology and knowledge. Then re-evaluate and relate them to the concept of language education. It will be done basically in three steps:

1. To abstract, from each work of Ong, Ellul, and Postman, the implicit and explicit conception that define language, knowledge, technology and the language education.

2. To identify agreement, emphasis or disagreement among these scholars on their conception of the chosen topics.

3. To re-evaluate the concept of language education according to previous investigation.

Our analyses will have an cumulative and relational character. It means that what we find relevant in the first scholar will be added and related to the second one and what we find in those two will be added and related to the third.

Using bibliographical research and an analytical and interpretive method we will in few cases introduce the empirical evidence of other researchers.

The citations in this work are organized according to the series *Communication and Human Values*, edited by Robert White & Michael Traber, and published by Sage Publications.

IV. The description of the scheme

1. Walter Ong's studies of the word

Spoken language also in the age of TV and computers is still the most fundamental form of human communication. This oral dimension of communication is doubtlessly the most distinctive feature of Ong's approach to the study of communication where he tries to awake attention to the oral character of language (1.1. *The orality of language*) and to the sounded word which creates the unique relationship to interiority when sound is compared to the rest of the human senses (1.2. *Sounded word, its power and interiority*). Therefore, not only language but also the modes thought and expression in "primary oral culture" have a series of identifiable features which are different from those in writing, television and computer cultures (1.3. *The characteristic of orally based thought*).

According to Ong, writing and print bring the "technologizing of the word" which artificially exteriorizes the thought alienating the self from nature, distancing people by interposing the text between them, and ordering or shaping the human discourse according to the "world on paper" (2.1. *Writing as a separation* and 2.2. *Print as a closed system*). As artificial extramental information storage and retrieval systems, writing and print created not only the new kind of knowledge (2.3. *The explosion of knowledge*) but as a consequence the growth of knowledge also accelerated the development of new media.

Ong confirms that external media not only technologizes the word; they can also detechnologize it. For example, the electronic media established the "secondary oral

culture" which is not the same as primary orality but has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even in its use of formulas (3.1. *TV, new media and secondary oral culture*). Ong's theoretical work on the relations of media to culture and consciousness is articulated also as a comprehensive framework for the analysis of psycho-culture and consciousness. He extends philosophical arguments about the phenomenology of sight and sound and about existential implication of different forms of time and space conception to account for cognitive influences of the symbolic forms of various media (3.2. *Language, consciousness, identity*).

2. Jacques Ellul's technological bluff

The area of technology is one in which Jacques Ellul speaks constantly since his famous book *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (*The Technological Society*), published in 1954. Ellul doesn't want to describe the accounts of techniques itself, neither to proclaim the new kingdom under the impact of techniques and their rapid development. He is more interested in technological phenomenon from philosophical perspective and discusses its metaphysical implication under the name of *technique* (1.1. *The philosophy of technology and technique*). He also regards the technical phenomenon as a wholly new moment in cultural social history at which technological effects and its cultural background we have to look deeper as it is usually (1.2. *The idea of technological progress and its effects*). The most significant and most dangerous consequences is one that involves restructuring the relation of consciousness to the object because introducing a new intentionality *technique* produces a special kind of artifact, mentality, and anti-symbol construction. (1.3. *The technical construction of consciousness*).

Ellul is a philosopher of technology in the humanistic tradition, as a thinker who understand technology to be the form of intention for which the traditional mind-body relationship is altered. This alteration is especially evident as the human attempts to use both tools and language. He contends that the word, essential to dialectical language, is a most important technique which opens the human to time, ambiguity, personal decision, goals, and freedom (2.1. *The language as technique*). Criticizing the preponderance of images, Ellul want to liberate the language as the fundamental weapon in the struggle for human freedom. In his opinion, our preference for images has corrupted and distorted language, which has become a sound or a text without sense (2.2. *The triumph of sight*

and contempt for word). Such lack of proportion between images and language involves the dialectic between reality and truth and emphasizes, therefore the transition from the meaningful symbols to mere clichés; from the dialectical relationship to the Otherness to the onedimensional "equilibrium of death" (2.3. *Clichés against symbols*).

3. Neil Postman's media ecology

The modern period, argues Postman, gave rise to a technocratic culture in which traditional values and customs coexist with an emerging scientific and technological world view. The assault on modernity occurs when this balance becomes upset, and the technological, with its emphasis on efficiency, takes command. Postman refers to this aspect of postmodernity as *technopoly*, a culture monopolized by the technological. Postman traces the historical movement of technology from being a support-system for a culture's traditions to competing with them (1.1. *From age of tools through technocracy to technopoly*). A new state of culture creates a totalitarian order with three "demons of discourse": irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence. Irrelevance comes from a large volume of context-free-information, disconnected from the people it addresses. Impotence follows because, in this glut of context-freeinformation most of what we know is "inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action".²¹ Finally, technology is a source of incoherence by the modern forms of electronic communication through its sensational, fragmented, impersonal language, that depicts an "unmanageable" and "indecipherable" world (1.2. *The generation of information and broken defenses*). As Postman shows, it redefines also what we mean by religion, art, family, truth, privacy, so that the new definitions fit the requirements of the technological thought-world (1.3. *New languages and draining of the great symbols*).

Postman argues that the way in which people think about time and space, and about things and processes, will be greatly influenced by the media. Nevertheless every culture has a special inclination to some kind of medium. It is also true that each medium of communication – from painting to hieroglyphs and from the alphabet to television – makes possible a new form of thought, of expression, and of sensibility (2.1. *The relationship between culture and epistemology*). For Postman the dominant image of corrosion by technology is the destruction of the print-based epistemology. The shift from linguistic to imagebased discourse is a key element of Postman's perspective on our culture. For him,

²¹ Postman N., *Amusing ourselves to death. Public discourse in the age of show business*, New York: Penguin Books 1985, p. 68.

there is no doubt that there exists a connection between typographic discourse and modernity, and that printing technology was a necessary condition for the development of modern science and modern society (2.2. *Print-based epistemology*). The fall of modernity is associated with the widespread adoption of television during the 1950's and 1960's. But the attack began earlier in the nineteenth century with the revolution in communication technologies, which included especially photography and telegraphy. According to Postman, the old epistemology is being threatened by a dangerous new television epistemology, that will harm us, because it thwarts logic, reason, and good sense. Under its influence, we will amuse ourselves to death (2.3. *Television epistemology*).

Postman is not content simply to describe the technopoly's or the postmodern sense of self, however. Instead, he has an idea of how postmodernism might be shaped, of how the negative effects of postmodernity might be mitigated. His answer, the answer that runs through just about every one of his books is education. The biggest problem created by the new media environment, suggests Postman, is the rapid disappearance of childhood not as a biological category but as a social artifact. Postman believes that human beings need first to be children before they can be grown-ups. Otherwise they remain like "television's adult-child" all their lives, with no sense of belonging, no capacity for lasting relationship, no respect for limits, and no grasp of the future (3.1. *The idea of childhood*). But television offers a delicious and original alternative to all of this, so that educational policy and practice are focused on television's transformation of the "entertainment environment". The students will believe that learning is the form of entertainment or, more precisely, that anything worth learning is impossible outside the form of entertainment (3.2. *Teaching as an amusing activity*). In line with this view, Postman offers a number of proposals for an educational system and curriculum. Through schooling and through education in the book and by the book-based epistemology Postman seeks to salvage television-based culture (3.3. *Media ecology against technopoly* and 3.4. *Language education as a conserving activity*).

V. Conclusions, appendix, bibliography

At the end of our work we will order outcomes according to our hypothesis. We will show also possible development of the idea of language education and its application for further research. It will be necessary to indicate the limitations of this work as well.

Although in appendix, the five interviews with leading scholars in media communication studies (Jack Goody, David Olson, Derrick de Kerckhove, Neil Postman, Eric McLuhan) and the letters by Walter Ong are an integral part of our research. Everyone of them was not only prepared and done during the preparation of this thesis but their contents are also based on the issues which we will discuss here. A little broader context will be found only in the first part of the interview with Eric McLuhan who speaks about the conversion and the importance of faith in the life of his father Marshall McLuhan. This unknown part of McLuhan's life as well its further correspondence with the Christianity of Ong, Ellul and Postman convinced us to present this interview as a whole.

Again in the appendix we have organized a glossary of terms. We find it very useful because of the specificity and originality of many concepts used and sometimes invented by Ong, Ellul and Postman. Most of the definitions presented there come directly from the works of our scholars, while all others strictly correspond with them. We hope that this glossary will help to clarify all key concepts used in this work. However, at this point we must add that the term "new media technologies", used already in the title, will be taken in a broad sense and will include the media technologies introduced after Gutenberg's invention of the printing press.

In the case of the bibliography we hope that we collected all works of Ong, Ellul and Postman regarding language, media communication, technology and education. Because of the direct contact and direct suggestion from the authors we did not have difficulty with Ong's and Postman's publications, while some problems we noted with the collection of Ellul's work. It was caused not only because of his death in 1994 that we cannot consult him, but first of all because of his numerous publications (around forty books and six hundred articles) and because of the characteristic style of Ellul's writings who interrelates many issues from different sciences in every of his publications. Apart from personal research, a significant help in this discernment of Ellul's ideas were the works offered by Joyce Main Hanks *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography* and *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography Update*.²²

²² Hanks J., *Jacques Ellul: A comprehensive bibliography*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press 1984; Hanks J., *Jacques Ellul: A comprehensive bibliography update*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press 1991.

VI. Acknowledgments

In the preparation of this dissertation I have received invaluable help from many persons. I would like especially to express my gratitude to Prof. Piercesare Rivoltella who during the last four years assisted my work with his precise observations and helpful suggestions. I wish, also to give thanks to Father Robert White who has introduced me to Walter Ong and was following my work on him with his stimulating ideas and ruthless criticism. The work on this topic would be impossible without my presence in the USA and Canada. The first debt I wish to acknowledge in helping me to go there is to Andrzej Wychucki, my good friend from Toronto, and to Bruce Craig from New York, who allowed me for more than one year to experience the fruitfulness of American universities and libraries. Thanks to my presence there, I could work with such personalities as David Olson, Robert Logan, Eric McLuhan, Derrick de Kerckhove, Neil Postman and John Pungente. Without the sincere interest, the critical response and the contribution of their persons, I would never be able to receive so many intellectual incentive and relevant tools for writing this dissertation.

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Last but not least I want to express my gratitude to my father, Marian Szklarek, who constantly teaches me to speak and to think, and to whom I have incurred many debts. I am dedicating this work to him.

CONCLUSIONS

Our inquiry generated many significant observation about the concept of language education in the age of new media technologies. Throughout the analysis of the work of Walter Ong, Jacques Ellul, and Neil Postman, it became increasingly apparent that, apart from a commonly shared attention to the importance of language, there are many differences among the above mentioned scholars in their understanding of such basic concepts as: word, media, culture, technology, nature, and education. We began our work with the hypothesis that the language education proposed by Postman is not sufficiently developed and that, although he claims otherwise, he does not follow, at least entirely, the thought of Ong and Ellul. According to our investigations the hypothesis is fully confirmed and even greatly exceeds our working assumption. In many cases, especially regarding technology and the media communication studies, Postman merely presents a popular version of serious research with many simplifications, prejudices, or even errors.

To make clearer the presentation of our conclusions we have organized them into four sections:

1. Language, culture, technology

2. Language and media
3. Language, thought, knowledge
4. Language education

1. Language, culture, technology

For Ong, Ellul, and Postman there is a clear and reciprocal relationship between language and culture. All of them stress that technology not only transforms the external world but penetrates the deep structures of language in human life. Nevertheless, they differ in their analyses. Ellul describes the whole culture as a *technique* which he understands as the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity. He claims that with modern technological development everything became one-dimensional and therefore, we have lost the necessary tension between the different cultural phenomena. He calls such a state of culture the "equilibrium of death".

Postman's position is similar to and even dependent on the analyses of Ellul, especially in the case of technology. Postman refers to Ellul's *technique as technopoly*: a state of culture which eliminates alternatives to technology making them invisible and therefore irrelevant. Further, Postman complains that technology is destroying both the diversity and growth of standards that take place across time and space by differences of gender, religion, and other aspects of humanity. For both Postman and Ellul this debilitating effect of technological culture not only attacks people externally but also deforms them interiorly by the "technical" use and the "textual" understanding of language. In such a situation metaphors and symbols are reduced to clichés, texts become structures without reference to reality, definitions are sanctified, most fundamental, metaphysical questions are not permitted, narratives and traditional values lose their significance, and consciousness becomes a mere technical phenomenon.

As our investigations have demonstrated, while Postman and Ellul are correct in their analyses underlining the special role of language which mirrors human complexity and relates people to Ellul's *Wholly Other* or to Postman's *narratives*, on the other hand they simplify many aspects of the cultural phenomena thus orienting themselves toward the technological determinism. Worse, they are not free from emotional prejudices towards many kinds of modern technology which often appear in their investigations. For example, in Ellul's opinion, *technique* everywhere creates ugliness, while according to Postman

television (amusement) and information technologies are designated by themselves to bring us to death. For Postman there is some "mysterious" connection between *technopoly* and such social problems as divorces, deadly weapons which children bring to school, or increased sexual activity and sexual diseases among the young.

Therefore, according to our investigations, Ellul's and Postman's definitions of culture as *technique* and as *technopoly* have to be considered as too simplistic and too broad. As we have demonstrated, they limit themselves to general statements, refusing to stay within the confines of the usual literature, authorities, topics, methods, and vocabulary that provide the standard definitions for a single field. Their wide-ranging frame of reference with a multitude of examples from all possible areas unfortunately transgress the orderly lines of demarcation of the subject matter. Marek Swinder describes accurately such a kind of methodology: "When the opportunities of investigation are endless the whole approach becomes too holistic or too inclusive, and the web of possible interactions between technology and humans approaches infinity. In such a situation crucial, underlying aspects of the subject of study and patterns become indeed very obscure as they dissolve in the ocean of unbounded complexity".²³ However, the insights offered especially by Ellul (in the case of technology Postman merely repeats the arguments of Ellul and Mumford) at least should be taken seriously as a possible warning of where technology, once given the absolute priority, can lead.

Contrary to Ellul and Postman, Ong does not subscribe to a negative judgment of technological development. For him while technology can dehumanize a lack of technology can do so as well. It seems to him that all human institutions or lack of institutions can dehumanize. Yet, up to the present, no one has shown that technology dehumanizes any more than other human activity. However, the key point of understanding the differences especially between Ellul and Ong lies in their contrary description of nature and artificiality. According to Ellul, technology distorts, changes and even places nature into the chains of artificial subjects, while for Ong it seems difficult to distinguish what is natural and what is artificial. In other words, Ellul considers *technique* as a danger and a distortion of nature, while Ong sees some possibilities to extend and to develop nature through technology.

²³ Swinder M., *From orality to electronicity: A new unity with a new nature*, (unpublished master thesis) North York, Ont.: York University, p. 49.

Such an optimistic and neutral understanding of technology by Ong is probably possible because he does not investigate important aspects of social life such as: schooling, family life, leisure time, etc. He looks at culture and technology from a different perspective; from the perspective of the diachronic and interior or the technologizing and detechnologizing development of the word. It also explains the positions of Ellul and Postman on the one side, and Ong's on the other. Postman's and Ellul's educational, historical and sociological analyses are contrasted with Ong's communicative and psychocultural explorations. For Ellul the central point of all technological society is located outside it: in the *Wholly Other* – in biblical faith and in religious freedom. For Ong the heart of all phenomena converge into human consciousness (religious experience not excluded). Ellul's analyses derive from sociological, economical, political, and theological areas, while Ong is more focused on the exteriorization and interiorization of the word apart from the social aspects. Despite these differences, all of them, and we must emphasize this, do not see language, culture and technology as mere external and not unrelated phenomena.

2. Language and media

The work by Ellul, Postman and Ong on media follows the general excitement and interest in this field which commenced early in this century and was developed especially by such scholars as: Milman Parry, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Jack Goody and many others. However, if Ong offers serious, original and insightful analyses of orality and literacy, Ellul investigates this topic as a secondary one in his work on modern propaganda and ideology. In his phenomenological proof of the superiority of sound over the images, Ellul treats the media as a mere technological phenomenon, while Postman uses the media studies for his educational goals often losing the scientific rigor and changing to persuasive discourse going too far with simplifications and obvious errors.

In the understanding of the spoken word we noted many convergences in the perceptions of Ong and Ellul. Both of them emphasize that the sounded word has a special power and interiority, and that speaking, not writing or reading, is most fundamental for a proper treatment and examination language. Because of this, Ong and Ellul direct sharp criticism of structuralism which takes a silent and fixate text as a representation of a sounded and "winged words". However, Ong is more precise in his analyses thanks to his diachronic perspective. He examines the "story" of the word from orality to literacy, and just the

phenomenon of the text represents for him some kind of chains for the oral-aural character of the word. Therefore, the treatment of the word by structuralists or better textualists, limited to its written representation, is in Ong's opinion a typical example of *pars pro toto*. Ong criticizes textualists not because they investigate a technologized word, but rather because they do this without looking at the roots of the word in orality.

Ellul does not underline the broken tradition of language. He emphasizes not the disintegration of language caused by writing and by the abandonment of orality, but by the fact that in its transformation language has become exactly the same as the whole technical environment with its attitudes, values, logic, and homogeneous structure. According to Ellul, language, words, and signs have lost their meaning because they are used by in a technical sense only without any reference to reality or without any dialectical otherness. Therefore, for Ellul, the understanding and treatment of language presented by textualists is clear confirmation that a word has become there an instrument of *technique* or even that a language becomes a *technique* – a judgment which appears excessive and which is not found in the work of Ong.

For Ellul every kind of visual representation of the word immediately affects our technical organization of thought, knowledge, and culture, which makes language artificial, useful, efficient, certain, tangible and thus deeply distorted. He confirms the existence of two different languages: that of hearing and that of seeing, emphasizing that there is almost complete independence between pictorial expression and vocalized expression. For him it is clear that writing changes hearing into sight and therefore transforms the relation and the understanding of a person into the relation and the understanding of a text.

Ong, thanks to his methodology, not only noted the separation from the oral origins of the word but some important and positive developments in the technologizing of the word as well. For him, the separation brought by writing if subjected to by reflection, ultimately brings a reconstituted unity. This unity between space and time, between knowledge and its possessor – the known and the knower – between the context and the object, thanks to writing, can become even more conscious and more articulate because human knowledge requires both in respect to proximity and distance: perceptions of proximity often influence and feed distancing analyses creating a more manageable intimacy. Ellul, on the contrary, does not seem to know the value of the golden mean. For him, every

contact with technology becomes an alienation and reification of the word and thus of the person and his/her lifeworld.

However, Ellul changes his opinion about writing when he analyzes it in connection with television. In the context of the spoken word, Ellul considers written language as the closure of the mind and the definitive loss of the truth, but in the context of television the same writing symbolizes the last bastion of this same truth. Such an instrumental treatment of writing is even more evident in the thought of Neil Postman who in his popular version of communication studies defends the print-based language only because it permits him to discredit television.

Postman argues that rational public discourse based on print and entertainment brought by television are mutually exclusive categories. Television, by turning discourse into entertainment, pollutes rationality of the written word. If public discourse could remain in the print-based epistemology, untainted by the fragmentary power of entertaining television, then public discourse would remain uncorrupted. The media not only transform the thing itself, they also have the power to transform our own perceptions, desires, and tastes. According to Postman, the media change us by offering something that is somehow more appealing, easier to "digest", than what is truly beneficial.

As Joli Jensen observes, for Postman "masscult is more appealing than art, pseudo-events are more interesting than reality, amusing accounts are preferable to serious ones. We become corrupted by this exposure and not only forget how to tell 'good' from 'bad', but start wanting the stuff that is bad for us".²⁴ These analyses presume that we, the media audience, have some instinctive desire for self destruction.

In Postman's analyses we cannot find any sufficient answer for the question: Why would we, the public, choose things that would harm us, and not choose things that will benefit us? At the heart of the media critique is an inescapable conundrum about public taste. For Postman, "the people" are not choosing the cultural forms that would improve them and their common situation. One way to avoid a direct attack on the people who are choosing the forms of culture or ideology or information or discourse that most disturb the critics is to blame the media for their effects on the audience. Before television, the Graphic Revolution, advertising or the Industrial Revolution, "the people" were serious, or

²⁴ Jensen J., *Redeeming modernity. Contradictions in media criticism*, Newbury Park-London-New Delhi: Sage Publications 1990, p. 53.

recognized reality, or did not covet products, or responded to high aesthetic quality. Afterwards, with the full development of the mass media, the basically worthy people became somehow incapacitated.

If the people's inherent worthiness is not to be questioned, then the critic must argue that a basically intelligent, perceptive, discriminating audience is being seduced, manipulated, and befuddled by the media. The media are thus endowed with seductive power. The final destructive power of the medium is in its ability to cultivate us in its own image – to turn us into itself. "Once we have succumbed to its siren song, we become the worst of its qualities – aesthetically banal, cognitively confused, ideologically swaddled consumers who are (on top of everything else) epistemologically silly".²⁵ Depending on such assumptions, Postman makes unjustified claims that the media turn art into trash, truth into illusion, action into passivity, reason into silliness. The media do this by offering us form and content so appealing that we cannot help but desire things that have terrible consequences for us individually and as a society.

It is remarkable that for Postman and Ellul television is made just from images, which, according to Ellul's phenomenological analyses, are not able to communicate the "Reality" and "Truth". On the contrary to them, Ong characterizes television as an oral-aural medium and connecting it with oral tradition calls it "the secondary orality". He does not describe at all contemporary culture as the culture which lost its writing ability and became image oriented phenomenon. In Ong's opinion, the catastrophic perspectives too often remain limited to simple comparisons between print and television with no deeper understanding of the origins of the word itself. Compared to the long dominance of print, television, although it reinforces commercial culture wherever it becomes prominent, promotes essentially an open-system model. Thus, we can say that Ong neither blames TV nor accepts it fully. However, if Postman and Ellul reduces television to images, Ong neglects the visual aspects of television. It is not enough to say that television is in a fundamental way an oralaural medium and that it seems impossible to use it as a purely visual device. We can say in this same way that there is no sense using television purely as an oral-aural medium.

The Postman, Ellul and Ong investigations of the media communication system include, also the new media connected with computer technologies. However, Ellul hardly touches

²⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

this topic. Postman discusses only the use of computers in the schools, and only Ong offers some general, nevertheless important analyses of this, as it is called today, metamedium. Ong, as in the case of technology, is in his relation to computers very optimistic. For him "computers were to be part of God's creation just as much as dinosaurs were".²⁶ He is not afraid of this new medium because, although it is seldom noticed, the classical "objections against writing are essentially the very same objections commonly urged today against computers by those who object to them"²⁷ A computer program depend on a decision to start this way rather than that way and the results brought by computer always have to be *interpreted*. In Ong's opinion it means that they only serve to create a meaning inside the human consciousness. They emerge and then lead to the human lifeworld.

Unfortunately, Ong, Ellul and Postman do not investigate the particular uses of computers involving language such as: word processing, spreadsheets, databases, hypertext, hypermedia, e-mail, multimedia, internet and others. Ellul and Postman are not interested in that because for them it is enough to condemn computers as a leading agent of *technique* or of *technopoly*, while Ong enters optimistically into this new area leaving, however, for someone else the task of more specialized studies.

Summarizing our outcomes about language and media we can conclude with particular clarity the evident differences between Ong, Postman and Ellul appear in the analyses on writing and on television. Because of the incisive writings of Walter Ong we were able to find imperfections, simplifications or mistakes not only by Jacques Ellul, but especially in the instrumental and persuasive analyses of Neil Postman.

3. Language, thought, knowledge

Although for Ong, Ellul and Postman there exists a strict relationship between language, thought and knowledge, all of them characterize and emphasize it in a different manner. For Ellul, language is not so much responsible for rational thinking as for symbolic and dialectic power which relate humans to God – the source of every meaning and sense of life. Thus, it will be no exaggeration to locate Ellul's descriptions on the theological rather than on the communicative, linguistic or cognitive level. Postman prefers to analyze

²⁶ Ong W., "Do we live in a post-Christian age?", *America* February 3, 1996, p. 34.

²⁷ Ong W., *Writing is a technology that restructures thought*, in: Baumann G. (Ed.), *The written word. Literacy in transition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986, p. 27.

language and thought in their relation to truth and to educational systems. Because of this he does not investigate language and thought but the print-based and television epistemologies and tries to apply or to discredit their attitudes for educational efforts. Following Korzybski, Postman also offers on this topic an interesting theory of general semantics: the study of the relationship between the world of things and events and the world of words about events and things. Yet, Ong focuses his interests in the inquiry of diachronic development of the word, thought and knowledge especially in the primary orality and in the cultures subjugated by writing. According to his exhaustive investigations on this topic, the orally based thought is additive, aggregative, redundant, empathetic, and is a conservative way of expression of the illiterate mind which is agonistically toned in a closed but homeostatic relationship to the human lifeworld. Writing and in particularly printing, despite their positive effects in the creation of reflective and more precise description of reality, are presented by Ong rather as a closed system of thought where the main line to which its characteristics relate is "separation"; separation of the known from the knower, distancing of the word from the plenum of existence, interpretation from data and the writer from the reader, the separation of the past from the present and being from time. However, in Ong's opinion the separation of writing on the one hand and the closeness of print on the other not only determined writing and printing to become the agent of closure and other negative effects but their relative freedom and relative stability also revealed a new openness and an new deliberation which in an explosion of knowledge catalyzed interiorization and personalization. imperfections, simplifications.

At this point it seems necessary to add that all these differences between the thought forms of people in oral cultures and those of literate Westerners or those of postmodern television viewers cannot be seen as merely two opposite distinctions such as: primitive/developed, irrational or prerational/rational, mythic/historical, simple/complex, mythopoeic/- logical-empirical, abstract/ empathic, traditional/modern, conserving/-subversive, linear/spontaneous, and so on. Jack Goody, for example, has argued that any distinction that suggests "two different modes of thought, approaches to knowledge, or forms to science" is inadequate, because "both are present not only in the same societies but in the same individuals".²⁸ Ong understood this complexity of relation between language and thought much better than Postman and Ellul who often look at it only from one point of view. Ong on the contrary is aware that the process of thinking no one has

²⁸ Goody J., *The domestication of the savage mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977, p. 148.

completely and adequately described and, because of this, tries not to favor or to absolutize the advantages or disadvantages of one or another medium. What is indisputable for him is the fact that thought in any developed form and the spoken word are not quite the same thing but they are basically united and that thought is not a chain of verbalization in all instances, but it is connected with words.

Ong, although from another perspective, approaches more closely in these observations to the classical version of this problem presented by Lev Vygotsky in his *Thought and Language*: "We came to the conclusion", writes Vygotsky, "that inner speech develops through a slow accumulation of functional and structural changes, that it branches off from the child's external speech simultaneously with the differentiation of the social and egocentric functions of speech, and finally that the speech structures mastered by the child become the basic structures of his thinking".²⁹ Ong confirms and even enlarges this observation emphasizing that words and thoughts come into being simultaneously and that every transformation of speech such as writing, printing, television and digitization, creates a proper but not exclusive characteristics of thinking.

Nevertheless, as in the case of the new media technologies connected mostly with computer, Ong does not develop the particular characteristics of the computer-based thought. He merely points out that every kind of thought, and thus, every kind of knowledge has to converge into human consciousness where it can receive the meaning. As Ong observed, computers can do almost anything with knowledge except think about it.

This general observation offers some important insights for the problem of artificial intelligence. According to our investigations of Ong, it is clear that the confusions with artificial intelligence arise when it is used to denote an independent intelligence separate from its human creators and users. Also Robert Logan and Derrick de Kerckhove remind us that "those who indulge in this futuristic fantasy forget that computers are only extensions of our own intelligence".³⁰ On the other hand with the appearance of the Internet and other forms of networked communications our culture is shifting from memory

²⁹ Vygotsky L., *Thought and language*, trans. Kozukin A., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1962. p. 51 (originally published in 1930).

³⁰ Logan R., *The fifth language: Learning a living in the computer age*, Toronto: Stoddart 1995, p. 30; De Kerckhove D., "Language is everywhere, language is everything", interview of J. Szklarek, appendix, p. 366.

to intelligence. As we noted, the media of the past were supports for remembering content. Books, photographs and paintings, video and audio tapes are all one form or another of "hard" copy, not susceptible to change except after an elaborate process of editing. According to de Kerckhove, "computers do not replay operations as videoplayback machines do, they 'remake' them. Whatever happens on a computer screen is not the recovery of a pre-existing set of data, but a new recombination of 'live' memory, hence intelligence. All processors are more or less 'intelligent', all processes happening in 'real-time' involve the management of intelligence. On the networks, human intelligence is multiplied and accelerated by machines".³¹

4. Language education

Many of the features connected with our understanding of language, thought and knowledge are unfortunately misleading. We have taken them for granted as if thought, literature or science were native to human existence as such. Our authors appreciate their importance and all place the understanding and the use of language in the center of human education. All of them underline that language is not a mere vehicle of information or even a tool of communication but an organization of chaos, an involvement in questions of time and of our own identity.

Ellul does it indirectly because for him the most central concept is the concept of symbol around which and on which depends the understanding of our existence and of the world. However, the most powerful symbol par excellence is represented in the word, and therefore, to deny the word means to deny humanity as well. According to Ellul, thanks to the word we can maintain the continuous tension between the subject and the object which, although acknowledging its own insufficiency, relate us to and mediate with some *otherness*. Therefore, speaking about the symbol, the word, the myth, the mystery and the sacred, Ellul, more than Ong and Postman, reminds us that it is impossible to treat language as an isolated phenomenon. Instead, his concern is language involved with the whole of human life. Thus language has to be dialectically combined and analyzed together with religion, law, politics, economics, literature, etc. In this context, language education becomes for Ellul an education of meaningful life, of spiritual and metaphysical "to be or not to be". Nevertheless his purpose, an educational one, remains broad and general, without any practical strategy or application.

³¹ De Kerckhove D., *Computer and its global empire*, in: Kania A. & Szklarek J. (Eds.), *Understanding the new aeropagus*, Warsaw: Wiesz (forthcoming).

Ong also opts for language education because the understanding of the contrasts between the noetic and psychological milieu of primary orality, that of writing and of print, and that of secondary orality is itself the liberal education. However, he acknowledges that for the question: how to do it concretely, "no one knows the full answers" because "learning about language is a very complex procedure, if only because learning language is an almost incredibly mysterious process". But for Ong "it is obvious that we have to support the spoken language, textualized language, and computerized language, all three, today, since they are and always will all be in active use (people still talk a lot, though they don't talk the way they used to before writing, print, and now computers) and since all interrelate in use (and theory)". After stating this Ong adds that "how we deal with the present mixture is a problem to be solved in particular circumstances".³²

Such an attempt for a particular concept of language education was offered by Postman. According to him, language education is a branch of media education or, as Postman prefers to call it, of media ecology. For Postman language is everything – it is the world described, shaped, and experienced through the different uses of the word such as naming or abstracting. Thus, the task of language education lies in the discovery and understanding of the ways the words and other media form the meaning of the world and of ourselves. In a more practical sense, on the one hand we should start to think also about thinking and its different modes, and on the other hand we should develop the ability of a prudent question-asking, the awareness of a metaphorical character of language, and of temporaneous, not absolute, importance of definitions.

It is not difficult to notice that Postman's proposal is a further application of McLuhan's "the medium is the message". What surprises us here is the fact that Postman's important and original idea of language education finds no deep foundation in his studies on culture and especially on media communication, where, as was demonstrated in this thesis, he has rather presented himself as a "persuasive copyist" who during his rewriting has committed or overlooked some significant mistakes. Because of this we can suppose that in the case of language education, Postman had probably a good intuition which, however, could not last and could not suffice for all his further arguments. On the other hand, also this intuition is not so clear as we could suppose because all three functions of language education mentioned by Postman (questions, metaphors and definitions) found

³² Ong W., *Letter to Jacek Szklarek from 26 March 1996*, appendix, p. 395 and 396 (all four quotations).

already an exhaustive elaboration in the work by Ogden and Richards in their famous book *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923).

However, first of all the Postman proposal of language education as a branch of critical thinking is based on his uncritical belief in the objective character of print-based language. Contrary to Postman, Kieran Egan points out, that "if we see the educational task as simply to put literacy in place, we risk undermining the very foundation on which a rich literacy must rest. Stimulating children's imaginations, metaphoric fluency, and narrative sophistication can become more prominent aims of early education. Such a view might help to resolve what is often seen as a conflict in early education between the need to establish the 'skills' of literacy and rational thought and the wish to encourage more varied experience and imaginative development".³³ Postman mentions only the spoken language when he tries to oppose a school with its oral and dialogical "interactivity" of the classroom to an individual and mostly silent use of computers. It is remarkable that in Postman's discussion of television the only reference is found in the print-based epistemology. Thus, it is also understandable that because of the many similarities between print-based language and the word processing by computers, Postman could discredit this last one – according to his general negative relationship toward technology – only by looking for some help to sustain the characteristics of the spoken word. In this case Postman was not able to comply with his own suggestion about the necessity to study every subject in its historical development. The story of the word seems to start for Postman with the Gutenberg's invention of the printing press so that a book represents for him a main reference point that we are human beings.

Postman's constant lack of interest in any self-consciously creative use of the media, including television, video, phonography, broadcasting and computers is also unacceptable. Therefore, it seems impossible to consider Postman's proposal as a media education which fully acknowledges such a possibility. On the contrary, Postman's language education in the entirety of his studies on culture and on media should protect our traditional use of language (print-based language) from every kind of the new media technologies. It makes clear, why the conserving activity became so important for educational system suggested by Postman.

³³ Egan K., "Literacy and the oral foundations of education", *Harvard Educational Review* 4 (1987), p. 469.

At the end of these examinations we have to conclude that Postman's proposal of language education, apart from its broadly documented importance and need, has to find a deeper foundation on serious cultural and communication studies. Ellul only partly enlarges Postman's cultural perspective sharing with him the not fully justified antagonism toward the presence of technology in the human milieu. In the case of media communication the work of Ong offers to Postman's proposal a most valuable and necessary compendium in the understanding of the multiple character of the word and in the strict interrelation of language to the different forms of thought and knowledge. According to this diversity of points of view, on the one hand language education should be considered as an alternative reality which we come to view thanks to a critical mind or, as Brookfield calls it, thanks to a "reflective skepticism" – not taking "for granted the universal truth of some statement, policy, or justification simply because of the authority ascribed to the source of this supposed truth".³⁴ On the other hand, according to our analyses, such an ability of language education requires not only the fullest achievement of literacy but also the fullest achievement of oral capacities and of the achievement offered by the new technologies of communication as well. As we have demonstrated, it is not enough to see language education as a defence of the word confined to the one concept. Of course, in the age of TV and computer we still need language education as analytical and critical thinking skills based on and developed after Gutenberg's invention – probably more than before – but on the other hand we have to re-evaluate it according to the old and new concept of knowledge brought by orality and the new media. In this perspective we should search for other concept of language education based more on multilinear critical thinking ready to cooperate with various kinds of knowledge.

5. The limits of this work and recommendation for future studies

Nevertheless, for the reasons which we presented in the introduction, one of the limitations of this work is the selection of qualified authors. Although Ong, Ellul and Postman can be considered as representative of the areas of communication, technology and education, they are not exhaustive or perfect representatives of the subject. However, a perfect representation does not exist. Therefore our choice is to leave to the future possible comparisons of other perspectives as represented by other scholars. For example, we believe that we would have arrived at many different conclusions, although

³⁴ Brookfield S., *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1991, p. 21.

not necessarily opposite, if we had chosen another trio of authors such as: Naom Chomsky (language), Alvin Toffler (technology) and Robert Logan (education).

Due to its non-quantitative method, our study which is first of all largely exploratory is not exactly precise. However, the purpose was not to measure phenomena precisely, nor to make accurate predictions about future developments, but to evaluate the works of chosen scholars (who, as our study has demonstrated, are considered to hold diverse perspectives) with regard to a model of language education proposed by Neil Postman.

Another limitation, in some way related to the one cited above, comes from the fact that this research touches upon many areas from different sciences. Thus there is a need for verification and further qualification of the presented material. However, we want to observe that while in some cases there could be a more quantitative response, there will still remain questions to which the quantitative responses will appear to be inappropriate. On this point it's enough to mention the far-reaching problems with the philosophy of education as proposed by various educationists.

Following the arguments of Postman, Ellul and Ong we have to acknowledge that this study is mostly related and thus limited to American and then to Western cultures. Apart of the analyses of the advanced societies such as Ellul's *technique* and Postman's *technopoly* we cannot forget that according to the United Nations' latest count, of the approximately 3000 languages spoken in the world today, only some 78 have a literature.³⁵

During this study, we realized fully the need to introduce into the examination of language education especially the cognitive sciences and neurological impact of different media. Therefore, future work can not neglect such significant and creative statements made on this topic by Piaget in *Genetic epistemology*, Vygotsky in the already mentioned *Thought and Language*, Bruner in *Actual minds, possible worlds*, and Chomsky in *Language and Mind*.

However, it has become also clearly evident from this study that the most important and the most difficult area for future research relates to the practical application of language instruction in schools and universities.

³⁵ *The Globe and Mail*, May 8, 1997, p. C-6.

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