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DEFENDING OURSELVES FROM THE MEDIA

**The undesired effects of TV, radio, newspapers and internet. Emotions,
Cognition and Identity**

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COME DIFENDERSI DAI MEDIA

Gli effetti indesiderati di giornali, radio TV e internet.

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INTRODUCTION

Today the media is our ever-present partner, so much so that we might be called “The Communication Society”. In less than a century we have moved from evenings around the fire place reflecting or telling stories to the silent ritual of television. Instead of books and newspapers we turn to hypertexts on the internet. From theaters to videotapes and DVD's. From live concerts to radio and CDs. For better or worse the media is now part of our daily life to the point that we don't take notice of it or its effects on our life, but we cannot do without it.

Beginning as early as the 1920s scholars and intellectuals began to question the social and individual risks deriving from the mass media. Despite an even more diverse widespread and sophisticated technology, the crucial question still remains: is the media good or bad for us? In general most people think everything is fine; there is nothing to worry about. Even many experts say there is no scientific evidence that the media produces negative effects. Critics, on the other hand, stigmatize the risks deriving from the media, without producing valid alternatives.

Arguably, the media can be a positive evolutionary force for more open and co-operative human relations. In fact like a potent medication, radio, television and print inject into global societies a strong dose of information and its different by-products such as: knowledge, openness, relativism, cosmopolitanism, tolerance and so on. Thanks to these psycho-social medications some persistent illnesses which have plagued humanity for millennia – ideology, isolation, fear of others, fear of the unknown, a sense of separation from nature, and the male-female dichotomy are noticeably improving.

However, for every medication, especially when potent, side-effects often develop. Therefore, while it contributes to curing some pathologies, the media indirectly creates or aggravates others.

Pharmacology teaches that certain substances taken in small doses are therapeutic while a higher dosage could even be deadly. The same principles can be found in dietetics, which stresses the importance of a daily diet in which all the nutrients are present in balanced proportions. The media can be seen like a big “cafeteria” for the mind. Our job is to select the menu. We should also keep in mind that when dealing with food or medication the amount is not the only factor which determines the effect. For example, intake on a full or empty stomach and the combination or lack of other substances, also contributes.

Balance is especially important with children. Some parents leave their children in front of the TV for hours without even bothering to make a selection of the programs. Other parents demonize television and don't even have a set in their homes. Other parents sit with their children from time to time and help them understand critically what they watch.

What is the best attitude? Continuing the analogy with food, the solution given by this book is to avoid both irresponsible and extremely rigid and radical behavior. We should carefully

measure the amount and quality of the various types of “media food”, learning how to “chew” well. We can develop an awareness of the effects they produce on us to avoid swallowing images, stories and news that could influence us negatively. The proposition of this book is to use the media moderately and with awareness enhancing the good it offers, avoiding toxic or difficult to digest images and contents.

If well used, the media is an incredible tool to stimulate awareness in people. Instead, except in rare cases, the quality is normally quite low, standardized and objectivity an illusion. In most cases the media focuses on economic and/or political gain, and not to the social value. The outcome is strongly flavored. With low quality ingredients, the final result is a rich variety of side effects such as: increased violence, pervasive fear, distorted sexuality, and the glorification of competition, even savage competition. Instead of awakening consciousness, this kind of cultural offering either narcotizes or promotes the worst elements of human behaviour .

What can be done? Can we express our disapproval and fight for higher quality choices? Should we give in and take what is offered, holding our noses? Should we rebel and give up the media, thus isolating ourselves from the world?

This book came out from my personal and professional interest in the effects of the media. During the 1980s I attempted - like several other colleagues - to make the media and political world aware of the need of higher quality programs and publications through various means – books and articles, conventions and interviews with the operators and managers of broadcasting organizations. Without achieving any notable improvement – - instead, a gradual sensible worsening - I then took another route. For more than 3 years I went on a complete media fast: absolutely no tv, no newspaper, no radio at all. It was a very interesting experience and a deeply “detoxifying” one, which gave me many useful hints to write this book. But I also understood that if we wish to live actively in the world we cannot give up the media, and we must not demonize them simplistically since they carry out an irreplaceable social function whose advantages are greater than the disadvantages. As Alberto Melucci claims

The influence of society (today) on individuals is incomparable with respect to the past. Each of us receives so many stimuli, information and messages which make us assume that our entire personality is moulded by society. We could see ourselves as small gears of this large machine which is moved by mechanisms that none of us controls. Dramatic images of societal domination on individuals such as those of Orwell in *1984* put us on guard against real risks, but can make us underestimate the fact that while societal influence spreads itself amongst individuals, the latter also receive a larger autonomy and instruments to think, choose and decide.¹

On the basis of these considerations, I started using the media again as a consumer; and as a researcher, I began to dedicate myself to develop a third possibility. That is, instead of excluding the media from our own lives or await for them to improve the quality of their

offer, we can learn to use them in a more active and conscious way, without abandoning ourselves passively to menus that are pre-established by others, but choosing programs accurately and “dosing” them as well. This third option is obviously more demanding and fatiguing, but the results are certainly worth the try.

As we shall see, our actions aren't triggered by mere chance, but instead they respond to some sort of need which we wish to satisfy. If we dedicate some of our time to the media, it's because these means somehow satisfy certain needs. Understanding which our personal needs are is a first step of awareness in the face of such instruments in order to learn to use them better and sometimes, to use them less by finding alternative ways to satisfy our demands.

The second stage of awareness consists in acknowledging the effects of a certain type of program, article or text in our psychophysical state. My years of “abstinence from the media allowed me to refine my sensitivity, to go beyond the obvious and routine, so that when I started watching a bit of TV again or reading a newspaper, I realized I could clearly feel the effects they had over me and how some programs or pieces of news changed my psychological, physical and emotional states, the consequences on the quality of my sleep and on my mood the next day, in my way of relating to others, etc.

I was able to recognize small but insidious effects on my thinking and feeling that I had never noticed before my fast, and that in many cases, they weren't even reported in scientific literature. I engaged myself in accurate bibliographical research in order to find whether there were books or articles which somehow dealt with the argument. I indeed found only some scattered references here and there, which followed no systematic order. I then started to observe my reactions more carefully and also began to write them in a sort of diary so as to gather ideas which from personal experience could be generalized and be also useful to other people. With the same attention, I began to observe my son and his reactions to certain TV programs as well as those of his friends, cousins and classmates. I also did some testing on university student groups.

The results of these observation were very useful and sometimes surprising. For example, I realized that after watching movies containing violent scenes the person's sleep was restless with unpleasant dreams and he/she would wake up tired. I also realized how much stomach tension was produced by watching or listening to news broadcasts with reports whose tone is strident and urgent like in a “war report”. (Stomach tension is more harmful when it occurs during or immediately after meals, when most of us tend to watch the news).

In addition to physical disturbances I also became aware that some programs or news items could provoke in the user false emotions, making him admire a person whom he rationally knew did not deserve it, or feeling contempt for people he normally appreciated. Who knows how many times this had happened to me in the past without my being aware. How could it be possible for the emotional part of my brain to feel sympathetic towards a person I rationally disliked or vice versa? I thought a critical attitude would be sufficient to protect oneself from the influence of the media, but I realized that even a person like myself who knew them well is vulnerable to some forms of hidden persuasion. That is how the idea for this book was born. Its intention is not to give definite answers and recipes, but rather to stimulate the

awareness of readers by providing them some tips, considerations and exercises. Based on the latter, one can acknowledge the actual state of things, and proceed to tailor a personalized media diet, avoiding unpleasant and sometimes subtle collateral effects the most possible.

Despite my wish to lay out the grounds for this discussion in an scientific way, basing myself to a great extent on accredited research and theories, I retained useful to also include elements and considerations gathered from personal experience as well as that of others who, like me, have matured observations not always accompanied by scientific data, yet are widely verifiable. It is true that subjective observations, if related to a few people, cannot be generalized. However, they have an undoubted validity for individual cases. In order to know whether certain types of programs or readings could have negative effects *spread* over the population, it is necessary to develop opportune scientific investigations and statistic elaboration, but to know that they are not good for *you* there is no need for extended research. Before and after the fruition of media programs, it is enough to “listen” with attention in order to gather awareness of how your inner state - physical, emotional or mental - has mutated.

To begin, I invite you to notice any subtle reactions you have while watching movies and television, listening to the talk radio shows, or reading magazines or papers. For example the next time you watch TV simply notice if and how your emotional state changes. Notice how many times you are exposed to the same news item. Notice if a news item is presented to help you reconcile the differences between view points or to emphasize the conflict. And mostly, notice if after having seen the program, you feel better or worse. If you feel worse you can legitimately conceive that the type of program you have viewed is not for you. If the effect occurs again the suspicion gradually turns into certainty and adequate precautions, as the ones recommend in this book, should be taken.

The book is infact designed to stimulate a greater awareness of possible negative side effects of using the media and offer some ideas and practices to create a personalized, balanced media diet.

Instead of excluding the media from our lives or waiting for an improvement in the quality, we can learn to create our own way of benefiting from it. We can use these tools actively and consciously, without passively abandoning ourselves to the menus decided by others.

Despite being a book addressed to end users, I hope it is also read by some media operators and managers, contributing a little in this way to raise the quality of what is being offered and to reduce some harmful effects. I have faith in human nature and believe that most media operators work in good faith. Yet, they contribute to produce certain ill effects without being aware of it. A greater knowledge of the consequences that their work could lead to, shall stimulate operators to program and produce the contents of the media in which they work with greater attention.

A brief plan of the book follows.

The first two chapters briefly deal with some general topics, for example the role of communication in today's society and the contributions of scientific research on the social effects of the media.

The chapter 3 to 6 deals with the root of the matter and explores the main side effects produced by the media on adults and children. They are divided in three categories: the emotional effects, the effects on identity and the cognitive effects. For each side effect there is useful advice, techniques and practices to prevent and/or "heal" it. At the end there are also some "emergency" techniques for the most serious and sudden cases.

Chapter 7 deals with media diet. We can say that we use the media because it satisfies certain needs. Understanding what our needs are is the first step to having more control over our media intake. We will look for alternatives to the media, based on the fact that the media satisfy certain needs and therefore an alternative is truly valid if these needs are satisfied in the same way, or better yet with fewer negative side effects. We will suggest some simple practices to focus on real needs and to find or creatively build useful alternative activities to satisfy them. We will also suggest practices and techniques to refine our sensitivity and understand by ourselves what is positive for us and what isn't. We will then use this ability to improve our diet, eliminating or reducing what is bad for us and increasing what we like and what is good for us.

Chapter 8 specifically deals with children. On how to make them more aware and responsible when using the media, on how to educate them to think critically, to tell reality from fiction, to become free from rigid pre-established patterns and learn to find solutions to the problems of life which can be diverse, more flexible and creative than the stereotyped ones presented by the media.