Ecologie mediali e politiche della conoscenza[1]

(In)giustizia epistemica e pratiche pedagogiche di resistenza

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Sommario

Le ecologie mediali, lungi dall'essere semplici ambienti di comunicazione, si configurano come spazi epistemici in cui si negoziano significati, si costruiscono conoscenze e si ridefiniscono gerarchie del sapere. Questo contributo analizza le tensioni tra (in)giustizia epistemica e controculture pedagogiche nelle ecologie mediali, esplorando come le piattaforme digitali possano al contempo amplificare voci a rischio di marginalizzazione e perpetuare meccanismi di esclusione epistemica. Su questo sfondo, le pratiche di resistenza emergono come strategie di riappropriazione del sapere, in grado di sfidare le epistemologie dominanti e di generare nuove forme di apprendimento informale. Il paper esamina la dialettica tra riproduzione e sovversione delle gerarchie epistemiche, evidenziando come le ecologie mediali possano trasformarsi in spazi di agentività discorsiva e resistenza pedagogica.

Parole chiave

Ecologie mediali, Ingiustizia epistemica, Resistenza pedagogica, Controculture digitali, Costruzione della conoscenza.

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Media ecologies and the politics of knowledge[1]

Epistemic (in)justice and pedagogical practices of resistance

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Abstract

Media ecologies, far from being merely communication environments, function as spaces where meanings are negotiated, knowledge is constructed, and epistemic hierarchies are redefined. This paper delves into the tensions between epistemic (in)justice and pedagogical countercultures within media ecologies, exploring how digital platforms can simultaneously amplify voices at risk of marginalization and reinforce mechanisms of epistemic exclusion. In this context, resistance practices emerge as strategies of knowledge reclamation, challenging dominant epistemologies and fostering new forms of informal learning. The paper examines the dialectic between reproduction and subversion of epistemic hierarchies, highlighting how media ecologies can become spaces of discursive agency and pedagogical resistance.

Keywords

Media ecologies, Epistemic injustice, Pedagogical resistance, Digital countercultures, Knowledge construction.

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Introduction: media and the fabric of everyday knowledge

In the late 1990s Roger Silverstone (1999) published a seminal work posing a question that, far from being obvious, remains as relevant today as ever: «Why study the media?». As educationalists, we might similarly ask: «why study the media in pedagogy»?

 Silverstone's response intersects ontological and epistemological concerns that deeply resonate with pedagogical inquiry. The author argues that media are not just tools for transmitting information; in turn, they function as ontologically structuring environments, integral to the everyday fabric of the «general texture of experience» (Silverstone, 1999, p. 2), or the daily processes through which knowledge is socially constructed. In other terms, media permeate our lives to an extent where they become invisible, just like the water for fishes, who are not aware of what the water surrounding them is (Wallace, 1995, in Granata, 2015). Studying media from a critical pedagogy perspective (Mariani, 2008; Massa, 1991) means exactly interrogating this pervasiveness and its implicit epistemologies, to understand the processes through which they construct epistemic and normative regimes defining what is knowable, sayable, and experienceable.

Following Silverstone (1999), media do not simply convey content but act as semiotic and technological environments that shape social interaction and knowledge construction. This perspective intersects with media ecology, first conceptualized by Postman (1970) and later developed by various scholars — including Lewis Mumford, Susan Langer, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong (see Granata, 2015). Media ecology argues for a systemic and relational approach to the study of media, not seen as isolated entities but as educational milieus and spaces of epistemic negotiation, where knowledge is produced, contested, and reconfigured through trajectories connecting subjective, intersubjective, and cultural dimensions of experience (Formenti & Cino, 2023).

Against this background, in this paper I explore media ecologies as epistemic contexts, shedding light on informal learning processes, practices of resistance, and the dynamics of epistemic justice and injustice that unfold within them. Indeed, once we assume that media do not just represent the world but actively contribute to its symbolic construction, it becomes pivotal to examine their politics of visibility, the logics of inclusion and exclusion shaping the circulation of knowledge, and the ways through which they configure subjectivities and their opportunities of expression (Creech, 2020; Lingel, 2017).

Building on an ecological perspective I will try to reflect on the epistemic and hermeneutic configurations emerging within digital platforms, to identify the tensions between institutional power and situated agency. From a systemic point of view (Bateson, 1976), at the micro level media shape how individuals negotiate their presence within a symbolic order of knowledge. At the meso level,

digital platforms work as informal communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) where categories of epistemic authority and legitimacy are redefined. At the macro level, media may both reproduce and/or challenge hegemonic epistemologies, shaping the narratives regulating the construction of common sense and the distribution of symbolic capital (Silverstone, 1999).

In this theoretical piece I will particularly zoom in on the role of media ecologies as arenas of resistance and epistemic reconfiguration. As we shall see, although the algorithmic logics of digital platforms can reinforce asymmetrical power structures, digital practices of counter-narrative and symbolic reappropriation show the existence of spaces for negotiation and agency. I understand these processes as forms of epistemic resistance manifesting through counter-discursive strategies that challenge dominant truth regimes and contribute to redefining the conditions and possibility of knowledge (Scott, 1990). In digital environments this resistance takes place through the creation of countercultural discourses, and/or strategic platform uses to create autonomous epistemic spaces evading the logics of surveillance and knowledge capitalism (Gehl, 2015).

Hence, media ecologies are not simply environments where knowledge is transmitted, but also spaces to contest, negotiate, and transform dominant epistemologies. As Silverstone (1999) puts it, it is within the fabric of everyday experience that we can appreciate media's deepest pedagogical and political role. A media ecology approach, then, invites us to move beyond the sole analysis of content, to recognize media as *lifeworlds* in their own rights, interrogating their epistemological and ontological implications, and understanding the role they play in shaping social realities and the construction of subjectivities.

Media ecologies and epistemic (in)justice

Understanding media ecologies as relational and semiotic milieus, where processes of meaning-making and knowledge production intertwine, asks us to interrogate whether and to what degrees epistemic asymmetries occur, are perpetuated or resisted. Within this framework, the issue of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) becomes particularly relevant, ethically and politically, for its being rooted in a deeper ontological and epistemological nexus. Or, in other terms, a relationship concerning both the conditions enabling the existence of knowing subjectivities, and the criteria through which knowledge is constructed, recognized, and spread (Caronia, 1997).

Ontologically, media ecologies shape epistemic subjectivities by determining who can emerge as a legitimate bearer of knowledge. This means that access to knowledge production is never neutral, but contingent upon the position a subject occupies within socio-technical and cultural infrastructures. Epistemologically,

they become arenas where certain forms of knowledge are validated, and others are dismissed or marginalized. As such, epistemic justice concerns not only the ability to speak, but also the right to be heard and recognized as credible within shared discursive practices.

According to Pohlhaus (2017), building on Dotson (2012), epistemic oppression occurs when certain knowing subjects not only encounter barriers in accessing and using shared epistemic resources, but are also denied the opportunity to actively participate in their creation and transformation.

Fricker's work (2007) well examines these dynamics, distinguishing between two primary forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical.

Testimonial injustice takes place when a subject's credibility is unfairly discredited because of deep-rooted social and cultural biases that lead to an unjustified depreciation of their status as legitimate knower. This occurrence is not just about communicative exclusion, but a more profound negation of the subject as an epistemic agent, whose capacity to contribute to collective knowledge is disregarded. Such injustice manifests when an individual's social identity, whether it be defined by gender, ethnicity, class, etc., implicitly measures their trustworthiness, framing their testimony as less valuable despite its actual content.

Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, arises when a social group lacks the necessary conceptual resources to clearly interpret and articulate its experiences within predominant structures of collective meanings. This instance intertwines linguistic, epistemological, and ontological dimension, for it undermines the same possibility to recognize certain experiences as plain and shareable forms of knowledge.

A relevant example, discussed by Fricker (2007), is the case of sexual harassment before it was formally coded as a discursive category. Not only were victims deprived of the means to denounce the abuse, but also could not fully name and make sense of their own experience. Specifically, the available social discourse was shaped by dominant social epistemologies (Goldberg, 2017) casting doubts on women's status as epistemic agents, further marginalizing their ability to have their experience understood and acknowledged.

Within media ecologies, these forms of epistemic exclusion occur across at least two interrelated levels: the discursive, concerning the ability to articulate alternative experiences and narratives, and the infrastructural, pertaining to the control of platforms and technological architectures that shape visibility and epistemic legitimacy.

From a discursive perspective, digital platforms work as arenas where voices at risk of marginalization may struggle to claim their epistemic authority, as they may encounter subtle yet pervasive forms of delegitimization. As Register et al. (2024) show, practices like content moderation and algorithmic filtering on platforms like Instagram function as devices of *epistemic curation*, favoring content

aligning with dominant norms and pushing alternative narratives that challenge mainstream discourses to the margins. As an example, the authors found that anti-racist activists and sex educators denounce the systematic removal of posts recounting discrimination experiences or using reclaimed terms from marginalized communities, whereas threats and insults directed at them frequently go unchecked. Thus, moderation practices, whether it be algorithmic or human, do not simply regulate content, but actively shape the possibilities for participation and acknowledgment of experiences.

Concerning infrastructures, the control of digital platforms translates into processes of centralized management of the architectures that determine content visibility. In other terms, following Gillespie (2018), platforms are not neutral intermediaries but function as *epistemic gatekeepers* that control the flow of knowledge. This sort of influence exceeds content moderation to incorporate the very ensemble of interfaces and algorithms guiding users' attention towards certain contents while sidelining others.

Within this context, Pasquale (2015) defines the Black Box Society as a system where algorithmic decisions, governing economy and information, are marked by increasing opacity hindering users' ability to understand or challenge the underlying mechanisms that shape their online visibility. It follows from here that the way some voices are amplified, and others are silenced goes beyond simple moderation, reflecting broader dynamics of informational asymmetries and algorithmic power.

In digital environments, moderation practices and algorithmic systems can thus be understood as *epistemic filtering devices*, with the power of silencing or weakening the visibility of voices that distance themselves from dominant norms and hampering the circulation of hermeneutic repertoires through which conceptualizing and making less visible populations' experiences intelligible. Studies like those by Noble (2018) and Rauchberg (2022) documented this phenomenon, illuminating the ways digital platforms not only marginalize content produced by minority communities, but also obstruct the circulation of conceptual categories necessary to interpret and recognize their experiences.

Specifically, Noble (2018) underlined how search engines are far from being neutral informational spaces, with algorithms, influenced by commercial interests, prioritizing content aligning with hegemonic perspectives to the detriment of racialized individuals, whose experiences get systematically downranked or associated with stigmatizing representations. The author, for example, recounted how her Google search of the phrases «Black girls» returned lots of sexist and stereotypical representations of Black women, although she had previously engaged with Black feminist websites.

Rauchberg (2022), on a related note, examined the shadow banning practice on TikTok (i.e., the restriction of content visibility without notification), show-

ing how content created by queer, transgender, and disabled users is often made invisible through obscure algorithmic practices. It follows from here that altering or suppressing visibility not only undermines the ability of these communities to be fairly represented and participate in knowledge construction, but also hinders the development of new interpretative frameworks that could make their experiences more visible and known.

These examples suggest that despite the democratizing opportunities enabled by digital media for groups historically at risk of marginalization, media ecologies cannot be conceived as neutral environments of free expression and participation. In turn, they can contribute to the reproduction of exclusionary and silencing *epistemic hierarchies*.

Although the internet certainly facilitated the dissemination of a vocabulary that names traditionally marginalized experiences, digital infrastructures tend to be dominated by hegemonic economic actors, which privilege content aligned with dominant epistemologies, thus risking marginalizing discourses that challenge the prevailing symbolic orders (Gonçalves & Oliveira, 2021).

This dynamic shows the structural nature of epistemic injustices within media ecologies, with digital platforms serving as complex architectures that determine who can speak, how, and with what degree of authority. Although mostly invisible, this process tends to reinforce preexisting social and economic hierarchies and consolidate the supremacy of certain forms of knowledge at the expense of others (Noble, 2018).

However, as we shall see, media ecologies are complex environments where forms of epistemic oppression and resistance coexist, as subjects at risk of marginalization can find ways to renegotiate their epistemic status through counter-hegemonic discursive practices. Independent platforms, blogs, podcasts, and social media may in fact facilitate the dissemination of counter-narratives challenging dominant epistemologies and introducing new interpretative frameworks.

Examples of that are social movements like Fridays for Future, that leveraged social media to amplify the voices of young activists to foster a more mindful understanding of climate change (Fritz et al., 2023). All of the above calls into play broader politics of visibility (Creech, 2020), a central issue in the study of media ecologies. Visibility, though, does not necessarily translate into epistemic recognition, especially when socio-technical infrastructures continue to reproduce forms of epistemic exclusion (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Media ecologies, then, can be understood as *liminal spaces*, where epistemic hierarchies are both reproduced and subverted. The next paragraph focuses on the latter instance, showing how the ability to recognize and deconstruct the hegemonic power dynamics governing the politics of knowledge production may foster pedagogical practices of resistance based on situated and plural epistemologies.

Digital countercultures and pedagogical practices of resistance

Drawing on Collins (1991), Pohlhaus (2017) notes that just like «where there is oppression there is also resistance to oppression», similarly, «where there has been epistemic injustice there has also been resistance to epistemic injustice» (p. 13). Following this line of inquiry, we may argue that digital forms of epistemic injustice can stimulate counterbalancing practices of pedagogical resistance, where epistemic injustice is identified and critically fought by those who experience it firsthand.

While in the previous paragraph I explored how media ecologies can be both catalysts for and barriers to epistemic justice, I will now delve into some digital forms of resistance as a response to power asymmetries in the production and circulation of knowledge. I argue that these practices do not solely contest dominant structures, but function as processes of *epistemic reconfigurations* through which individuals and groups at risk of marginalization may reclaim their right to define and share knowledge within autonomous and/or collective spaces.

My understanding of resistance, here, builds on Giroux's (1983) view of pedagogy as engaging with relations of knowledge, language, and power, reinterpreted from formal to informal contexts. It is not limited to direct oppositions to hegemonic knowledge institutions but includes everyday, situated, and often invisible pedagogical practices (Contini, 2009). These take shape through counter-narratives that foster networks of solidarity and alternative ways of knowing.

Maragh-Lloyd (2020) provides an example of these practices in her study on Black women's strategies of digital resistance. This phenomenon can be read through the lens of Collins' (1989) conceptualization of oppositional consciousness, describing the ways through which marginalized groups promote critical awareness in response to their oppression and generate new forms of knowledge and resistance. Creating alternative narratives within media ecologies is an example of how Black women assert their epistemic position to contest dominant structures through the construction of both situated and collective knowledge.

The author shows that Black women develop resistance practices employing *hidden transcripts* (Scott, 1990), or the repertoires of symbolic resources, coded languages, and selective sharing of information to fight the post-racial logics entrenched in digital cultures without necessarily taking the form of overt activism.

Examples of that are self-presentation tactics through images that celebrate Black aesthetics, like natural Black hair for which many feel discriminated against, as a resistance to Eurocentric beauty standards, or the strategic dissemination of news as a form of protest, such as antiracist new articles from selected sources to educate people about ongoing forms of racial oppressions. Although these strategies may not appear explicitly subversive, women from Maragh-Lloyd's

study see them as contributing to a renegotiation of power dynamics within media ecologies.

Schmitz et al. (2022) provide another example of digital resistance with their study on LGBTQ+ Latinx digital activism. This case relates to queer epistemologies, especially the critique of static identities by Hall (2017) and Butler (1993). Hall emphasizes how queer epistemologies contest rigid sexual and gender identity categories promoting fluidity and contextual knowledge, while Butler illuminates the performative and socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality. The forms of LGBTQ+ Latinx activism reported in Schmitz et al. (2022) echo these perspectives through the enactment of resistance practices contesting heteronormative knowledge categories, using digital spaces to negotiate, redefine, and amplify forms of queer belonging and visibility. The authors show how queer Latinx communities transformed digital platforms into sites of intersectional justice through forms of *expressive activism* (Cornfield et al., 2018): here, artistic content creation, the development of support networks to address structural inequalities related to race, gender, sexuality, and migration status, and the dissemination of educational resources all mingle to produce pedagogical resistance and counterculture. For example, the platforms examined in the study tend to promote art as a form of resistance, promoting initiatives ranging from the celebration of queer Latinx culture through literature and photography, to the construction of online safe spaces to discuss health and civil rights (e.g. raising awareness about HIV-related stigma, promoting free immigration law clinics and LGBTQ+ asylum services, etc.). These practices show how media ecologies can function as communities of practice where learning emerges as a collaborative, collective process (Wenger, 1998).

All the above can be read through the conceptual lenses of *digital countercultures*, as proposed by Lingel (2017), to understand how media ecologies can be spaces for alternative learning, community-based knowledge production, and the development of new epistemic models. The author shows that countercultural communities use digital media to create learning environments that not only contest established epistemic authorities, but propose alternative models of learning, grounded in collective participation and the recognition of lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. Digital resistance practices, however, are not only about countering exclusionary dynamics through alternative content dissemination. They also concern reconfiguring platforms as spaces of civic participation and solidarity. In this sense, the concept of *epistemic resistance*, drawn from feminist epistemologies (Tuana, 2017), proves useful to understand how marginalized communities develop strategies that challenge epistemic injustice and create different spaces for knowledge production. While epistemic resistance can take the form of direct responses to hegemonic systems, it can also manifest via the construction of independent epistemic arenas. Applied

to media ecologies, this concept helps shedding light on phenomena such as the migration from mainstream platforms to niche, self-managed spaces (e.g., from Twitter/X to Mastodon — Frost-Arnold, 2024), as well as the creation of autonomous communication channels, like independent LGBTQ+ Latinx networks and Black feminist blogs (Maragh-Lloyd, 2020; Schmitz et al., 2022). Here, epistemic resistance is not just an act of opposition, but of re-signifying digital environments, with knowledge production becoming a profoundly political and community-driven act. At the same time, though, movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter showed how also mainstream social media can be strategically used to redefine access to visibility, making platforms originally designed for entertainment and socialization into political sites of activism (Cammaerts, 2021). Still, visibility is not neutral, nor intrinsically emancipatory: algorithmic inclusion can, in fact, expose marginalized groups to digital surveillance and repression of their voces (Register et al., 2024). Managing visibility, in turn, becomes a political act concerning not only resisting dominant and discriminatory narratives, but also the ability to create safe spaces and govern media exposure without being absorbed into logics such as the spectacularization or monetization of dissent. Taken together, these practices of resistance and counterculture do not just challenge dominant power structures, but also contribute to reframe media ecologies as loci of informal learning, civic participation, and autonomous knowledge production.

Conclusions

In this paper I argued that media ecologies emerge as liminal epistemic spaces, marked at once by tensions of epistemic injustice and practices of resistance, where knowledge is not solely transmitted, but negotiated, contested, and reconstructed. I therefore understand media ecologies as *epistemologically* and *ontologically dense environments*, for they shape the very conditions of possibility for knowledge. This occurs determining who can speak, which narratives are legitimized, and how and the extent to which epistemic subjectivities are excluded or acknowledged.

This ambivalence shows how media ecologies can serve as both spaces of emancipation and of perpetuation of epistemic asymmetries. Yet, it is exactly within this friction that practices of resistance emerge, redefining media ecologies as pedagogical sites of discursive agency and infrastructural experimentation. Indeed, the circulation of countercultural discourses, the migration towards more autonomous platforms, the construction of independent digital archives, the creation of alternative communities of practice, do not just challenge the hegemonic dynamics of knowledge production, but also reconfigure

media ecologies as spaces of *situated learning* where, at least partially, historically marginalized subjectivities can reclaim their agency in the broader politics of knowledge construction and recognition. From a critical pedagogy perspective (Mariani, 2008; Massa, 1991) these dynamics reveal how educational processes unfold beyond traditional institutions and within circuits where informal learning and the formation of social, collective, and political identities intertwine with practices of resistance. In this sense, I argue, pedagogical research may find a fertile soil of inquiry in the interrogation of the structural conditions that shape access, control knowledge distribution, and ratify or question forms of exclusion within media ecologies.

This research agenda, integrating epistemic reflexivity and awareness (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), can promote a critical stance that can then inform pedagogical interventions, questioning who controls media infrastructures, which voices are amplified and silenced, and which ones struggle to reclaim their sit at the table constructing *counter-hegemonic pedagogies* capable of challenging knowledge hierarchies. Finally, conceiving of media ecologies as loci of transformative learning asks us to move beyond their proclaimed emancipatory potential, towards a more nuanced understanding of their ambiguities through a critical practice of inquiry. Paying attention to the infrastructures of media ecologies and their epistemological dimensions opens opportunities to imagine digital environments that do not just reflect extant inequalities but can also foster epistemic justice. Such an approach may ultimately serve to start operating a transformation of media ecologies into more epistemically fair milieus, where the widespread idea of digital media as democratic loci is more than a proclaim where participation is actually a prerogative of a few, and knowledge is recognized in its ontological and cultural heterogeneity.

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