

PODCASTS, MYTHS, AND THE DIGITAL AGE: A CONVERSATION WITH PEPPINO ORTOLEVA

PODCAST'LER, MİTLER VE DİJİTAL ÇAĞ: PEPPINO ORTOLEVA İLE BİR SÖYLEŞİ

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Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

We interviewed Professor Peppino Ortoleva, a distinguished Italian scholar of Media History and Theory at the University of Turin (Italy), who has long investigated the cultural and social implications of communication in contemporary societies. His work has outlined how media shape the transmission of historical knowledge, while also examining the enduring presence of myths within modern and postmodern culture. In this interview, Professor Ortoleva addresses key aspects of his research, from the coexistence of high- and low-intensity myths to the transformations brought about by digital media. He also reflects on the rise of new sound media -particularly podcasts- which he considers a distinct form of storytelling that combines rhythm, words, and sounds, opening new possibilities for communication and education.

-In his famous work entitled *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard states that a characteristic of the current era is the absence of global mythologies. Notwithstanding this, myths have not disappeared from post-modern society and imagination: they have been "desacralised", thus becoming low-intensity myths. You have addressed this concept in your recent book *Myths at low intensity*. What do you mean by this definition?

Let's start with the widespread idea that our era has lost not just globalised myths but myths in general. There are theories from both the right and left sides of the political spectrum that claim we are a civilisation without myths. According to Heidegger and other German philosophers, modern humanity

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has severed its connection with the world in an age dominated by technology and science, as it has lost its myths. On the left, some argue that we have overcome the concept of myths, believing that science has replaced myths. This view suggests that we don't need myths because we possess knowledge. However, this idea, deeply rooted in our culture, is mistaken because no civilisation exists without myths. I explore this in my book on low-intensity myths, which is based on a quotation from Honore de Balzac, the French novelist, who said, "It is not true that we do not have myths; myths surround us, and myths explain everything". What is my point in defining low-intensity myths? Broadly, myths are stories that link daily life with what I call the "cosmos", the "big unknown" that humanity does not understand but still needs to, such as questions about life after death or whether there are great extra-human creatures (like Gods and so on). These are the questions that myths generally address by connecting everyday life to the unknown.

This reminds me of what Immanuel Kant says in the Critique of Pure Reason, where he states that we possess rationality, but there is a tendency in every human being to believe in something unseen. Furthermore, Western civilisation and Western rationality are founded on the idea that, before philosophy, people believed in myths, implying that philosophical knowledge has replaced myths. This is not true; it is a dichotomy that we have created methodologically.

Yes, the point is precisely this. These tales, these narrations that connect the human experience with something that cannot be experienced, are part of our mental life, and we must not give up on them. These stories are myths.

Can you give us some examples of these myths?

For instance, old types of myths include the Gods of Ancient Greece, from which we take the word "myths" itself. The word "myths" comes from Ancient Greek and describes a series of tales that the Greeks used as the foundation of their civilisation. Such tales exist in every civilisation. Evidence of this is that, when European civilisation began to encounter other civilisations, it was discovered that these other societies had different myths. The idea conveyed to us is that, at a certain point, the emergence of philosophy and a rational, analytical approach to reality replaced the reliance on myths. However, the notion that we do not have myths or that we lack global myths, as Lyotard claims, is not accurate. Global myths also exist in our culture. For example, famous film stars and rock stars are considered global myths. Astrology exemplifies a fascinating modern and global myth. There are different forms of astrology; Chinese astrology differs from European astrology, but astrology exists in many cultures worldwide. From a purely scientific perspective, it can be regarded as a pseudo-science; from my perspective, it is best described as a "mythological machine," a compelling phrase coined by Furio Jesi. Astrology is a system that allows millions of people each day to construct their own stories through a mythological link between the Earth they inhabit and the stars,

representing perhaps the most mythological form of connection.

In my interpretation, what is typical of our age is low-intensity myths. This does not mean that we have only low-intensity myths. High-intensity myths keep existing, but low-intensity myths are a relatively new phenomenon. The difference is that high-intensity myths are generally surrounded by rituals and celebrated in various ways. They are located in a time that is not our time, probably a non-existent time, such as the time of the origins. These myths ask people not to believe them, but to at least respect them. What I call low-intensity myths are those typically found in our world. They feature protagonists similar to us and do not require us to believe them. They ask us to narrate them, listen to their narration, and “consume” them. In many ways, low-intensity myths are typical of leisure time; they are not typical of the religious time, of the religious feasts and celebrations.

We need to acknowledge their existence, whether we like them or not...

Yes, because we also need to follow them, we must enjoy listening to these tales, even though we perceive them as fiction. One of the most critical developments in the rise of low-intensity myths has been the emergence of the novel. The novel, as a literary form, exists within our world, not in a mythological realm. One characteristic of the novel is that it is written in prose rather than verse. It employs a language similar to our everyday speech. The language of prose is less intense compared to the high-intensity language of poetry, which encourages the reader to distance themselves from the world.

One of the most intriguing aspects of what I am describing is the novel, which is regarded as the leap, and that is *Don Quijote*. The central theme of *Don Quijote* is a person who still believes in ancient myths and lives in a fictional world, a world built from mundane daily reality. Therefore, the interesting thing about that novel is that you start by laughing at *Don Quijote* and end up being moved by his condition. You feel compassion and even admiration for him, in a way, and you feel nostalgia for a different kind of myths from those of the world we live in now. *Don Quijote* represents a modest mythic figure, a person who resides in a specific region of Spain during the period his author was writing. At the same time, it suggests that we need myths because *Sancho Panza*, who is *Don Quijote*'s helper, also believes in myths. In this story, you find both the origin of modest myths and the necessity to believe in myths, which is expressed by the figure of *Don Quijote*. Of course, what I call modest myths are not only made of novels; they also include journalism, because the boom of modern novels, which occurs in Britain in the 18th century, is also the birthplace of journalism.

One of my goals is to illustrate to my students, particularly those studying journalism, who argue that “people nowadays do not want news; they want stories,” that this phenomenon is not new. I provide examples from 18th-century English newspapers, where news is presented as narratives.

For instance, I show them a news story about a murder that is described sensationally. I explain to my students, "Look, this news is not so different from the sensationalist stories we read in today's newspapers. Narratives have always been a part of communication and journalism because people are inherently drawn to stories. This is part of human nature and curiosity".

Yes, stories and narrations play a key role in people's development. A person does not only grow by learning to speak and to play, but also by learning how to tell stories and how to listen to them. At the same time, the need for stories in newspapers is often connected to our desire to stay linked to the reality around us. If I live in London, I want to know what is happening in my city. Simultaneously, I consume news that carries a mythological significance. To illustrate this, I often give an example from crime reporting. In this area, we tend to be more interested in news that resembles Greek tragedies-such as mothers who kill their children or lovers who murder each other. What we seek in this type of news is a tragic aspect of the world.

In ancient times, people attended the theatre to watch the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, which taught about the tragic aspects of life. Today, we experience tragedies in different ways.

Exactly. I find the connection between Greek tragedies and crime stories interesting because what makes Greek tragedy more intense than crime stories, which are less intense myths, is that Greek tragedy is set in a world that is not our own. The protagonists in mythological stories are gods, semi-gods, and people dealing with gods, whereas in crime stories, the protagonists are ordinary people. Moreover, in Greek tragedies, there is something transcendent: the destiny decided by the gods. In crime stories, people meet their everyday destiny. Although the themes of Greek tragedy and crime news might be similar, the way they are told and the relationship the reader forms with the story are different because the reader can identify with them.

We read true crime because we tend to identify with the victims in the story, not with the serial killers, of course...

Yes, in my opinion, serial killers are between high- and low-intensity myths; they exist on a border, like vampires. In the realm of low-intensity myths, there are border figures that are, in a way, closer to high-intensity myths. For example, vampires are immortal like gods; therefore, they can be considered high-intensity myths. At the same time, they can be killed with a wooden stake. Similarly, the media portray a serial killer as a superhuman (and, therefore, closer to a high-intensity myth), but he is still human. He might possess superpowers that ordinary people cannot imagine, such as exceptional time-management and organisational skills to commit murders, all while remaining human. The presence of serial killers in crime stories and the true crime genre is central to contemporary media and true crime because, in my view, even though popular culture often revolves around low-intensity myths, we still need myths with a

broader spectrum. Returning to the example of vampires I mentioned earlier, which are popular in stories and TV series today, they demonstrate how the modern and postmodern eras, although unable to replicate the great mythologies of ancient Greece and Rome, nonetheless strive to create mythological categories like vampires, which exist between the human and the nonhuman, between mortal and immortal.

It seems to me, therefore, that we can find low-intensity myths in various contexts.

Yes, of course. It also encompasses certain forms of journalism and fake news to some degree. Fake news itself is a type of low-level myth because people believe it, and they tell each other, "This is true". Generally, they deal with mythological topics, such as conspiracy theories: just like with myths, many people believe in them but cannot prove their existence or truthfulness.

There are also low-intensity myths that are essential to our cultures, such as the myth of romantic love. This myth is fascinating because it involves ordinary people and simultaneously gives the impression of transcending everyday life, taking us to a different realm. When I say that romantic love is a myth, I do not mean it is false because people indeed experience romantic love, and I pity anyone who has not encountered it in their lives. However, it is a real experience that connects us to another world. At the same time, romantic love is a story, a tale we feel the need to share with others. When we experience romantic love, don't we always want to tell our friends? Just like we do with low-intensity myths. In some ways, the low-intensity myth of romantic love resembles that of revolution. Revolution is an event we imagine as radically transforming our lives, just as the experience of love is something we believe could dramatically change our condition. There's a famous quote by Marx about the Paris Commune: "The workers of Paris have stormed heaven!" Similarly, when we fall in love, we feel like we are in heaven, don't we?

-What emerges from your answer to the previous question is that the intriguing aspects of contemporaneity lie in the paradox surrounding both high-intensity myths and low-intensity myths. Could you tell us more about this coexistence? Perhaps we could begin with the great religious traditions you describe as high-intensity myths that continue to be influential in the contemporary era.

When I say that religions are high-intensity myths in the contemporary era, I mean something very specific. At the heart of all religions are myths, which we believe in without being able to prove their veracity. Take Christianity, for example. Even the most fervent Christian can admit that Christianity is based on a myth: the death and resurrection of a human being who was not just human, namely, Jesus. In this sense, one of the main prayers of Christianity is the Lord's Prayer, which reads "Our Father, who art in heaven", thus suggesting that the Father, the God we believe in, is in another dimension, different from

the mundane one.

This myth coexists with the low-intensity ones, which is an exciting aspect of the contemporary era. We have a coexistence of many different levels, as evidenced by the presence of traditional religions alongside new global myths that circulate and masquerade as high-intensity ones, such as the adoption of religions from countries whose origins are not well understood. For example, the case of many Westerners who go to the shaman for back pain treatment. Can we consider this a high-intensity or low-intensity myth? I consider it a mix of the two, and a form of consumption at the same time. In the global age, we have an incredible mixture of mythologies and beliefs from different parts of the world and civilisations.

When considering the coexistence of various mythologies and beliefs, yoga frequently stands out. Nowadays, many individuals practice yoga primarily to lose weight or to tone their muscles. However, the reality is that yoga is a complex system of ascetic and meditative practices, and it is one of the oldest philosophies in the world.

Yes, this happens because there is a tendency to diminish the intensity of many myths, making them less popular. However, there is also a tendency to amplify what was originally a low-intensity myth into something grander, like turning Elvis Presley into a perennial ghost who travels around the world. This is a good example of how some myths that originated in popular culture have been transformed into something else.

-This leads us to the third question. Reading your book on low-intensity myths, it becomes clear that the internet is one of the privileged non-places for analysing the low-intensity myths of contemporaneity. What are the trends of low intensity in digital environments?

In my view, myths arise from what I call “mythic magma”, where some stories are continuously told. Over time, certain stories become more popular because they help explain some of the mysteries of human life and give it meaning. Life is constantly evolving and changing, but there is always a particular episode we choose because it helps us understand an essential aspect of life. What is happening today, in the age of the internet, is that the production, circulation, and renewal of myths happen at a faster pace than in earlier times. At the same time, if the myths we draw from the mythical magma were once shared stories that every member of a society could relate to, now most people tend to select their myths subjectively and spread them.

They can also “consume” them and “leave” them, as is the case with influencers...

Yes, this is a fascinating example. To understand the role of influencers in modern society, we must start with the stars of cinema, who appeared when the first films were released. Movie stars were instant myths-actors whom or-

dinary people saw in films and elevated to mythical status because of their beauty and remarkable personalities. A star is a person who transcends a single story. They are like masks, as in Greek tragedies, but made of flesh. The first actress to be called a movie star was an Italian named Francesca Bertini. The phenomenon of film stars from the early twentieth century to the seventies, such as Marilyn Monroe and Marlon Brando, was a typical low-intensity myth. Photographers and paparazzi followed these figures to create embarrassing situations, but at the same time, they transcend their physical personas because the movie industry shapes them. This is the traditional star system, which evolves with the advent of television. TV stars differ from cinema stars; they tend to be less intense and are closer to us, which is why we tend not to care much about their private lives. In terms of intensity, influencers are even one step lower than TV stars, because it is the audience that decides which influencers gain fame and which do not. This happens because, with the internet, people create their myths. Moreover, the fame of influencers is fleeting, whereas the legacy of iconic movie stars, like Marlon Brando, endures. Therefore, we can say that movie stars are part of the star system; they are icons of popular culture that persist today. TV stars tend to fade more quickly, within a few decades. As for influencers, they often lose their fame within months or a few years. We might almost call them instant stars. What makes the internet different is that people create their myths, aware that they are shaping their own stories. They recognise that they are drawing from the collective consciousness and moulding it into a myth.

-An interesting aspect is also represented by the new media through which low-intensity myths circulate and are transmitted. Podcasts on topics ranging from arts, true crime, and culture exemplify this trend well. Could you tell us more about the podcast and how you perceive this medium?

Until very recently, the world of sound media was divided into three: telephone, radio, and records. Records were specialised only in music because non-music records never achieved much success. Radio was all about sound. The best definition of radio was given by the aesthetician Rudolf Arnheim, who said that radio organises the world for the ear. It transforms the world into sound and arranges it so that every sound can be part of the radio. Therefore, the sound media system was strict and very well organised. Now, we are witnessing an explosion of sound and media systems: we still have records and radio, but also *Spotify* and *YouTube Music*. We also have new sound media, including audiobooks. An audiobook is more than just a transcript of a book; it is a medium in its own right. You can present an audiobook in many ways, such as simply reading it or turning it into drama. Also, the voice that reads the audiobook plays a crucial role in making it more engaging for listeners. Consequently, an audiobook has aesthetic qualities that set it apart from a book and make it more than just a transposition. However, in my opinion, the most significant innovation is represented by podcasts. Podcasts cannot be consid-

ered merely a continuation of radio; in my view, they constitute an entirely new medium. Many theories of post-mediality disagree with me, arguing that podcasts cannot be regarded as media, since traditional media no longer exist and the internet has replaced them. I disagree because I believe it is still necessary to differentiate between various forms, including radio and podcasts. A podcast is not radio because, firstly, it is on demand, and secondly, it is generally shorter than radio programmes. A podcast lasting more than 20 minutes is usually regarded as poor. A good podcast is typically concise. Podcasts must be designed to be listened to in a variety of situations, as many people listen while driving, doing chores, or taking a break. An interesting point I have noticed while working on podcasts is that they do not follow the same sequence as radio, which often involves voice, music, and voice again in sequence. In podcasts, you have the speaker and sound effects happening simultaneously. This is an exciting feature of podcasts, as they become a medium composed of words and sounds. Note that I did not say words and music, but words and sounds. This also brings podcasts closer to rock dramas, where sound is used to animate words and discourse, creating rhythm. In podcasts, this same dynamic allows listeners to follow the content with focus.

-We discussed podcasts, which are among the most popular new media, and how they challenge the traditional relationship between orality and writing. In this context, how do you perceive the relationship between orality and writing?

The podcast is a medium where we can still distinguish between the forms of orality and writing. However, social media is the space where orality and writing converge. This shows that, on social media, writing follows the rules of orality. This convergence can often cause misunderstandings and other problems, as I will explain shortly. These misunderstandings happen because the merging of speaking and writing is a new phenomenon, one we are not yet used to and, therefore, do not know how to handle. Making this situation more complex is the fact that the convergence of speaking and writing occurs in a world now filled with information, so there is also a tendency to feel disoriented by this vast amount of data.

Let me clarify: on social media, we often casually write a comment on a post or a piece of news we have seen. Writing on social media does not involve the same level of reflection as composing a text, an essay, or a letter, for example. It is a much more immediate form of writing, set in the here and now, which constitutes the context of social media interactions. Therefore, writing on social media has a sense of immediacy, similar to the words and conversations we have in the oral dimension of everyday life. However, what is decontextualised is the reading of my comment, because the reader does so afterwards, in a completely different context and at a different time. Reading on social media can happen at any moment; it lacks the immediate presence of writing. Consequently, the risk of misunderstandings on the internet is very high. In

my opinion, these misunderstandings often give rise to conspiracy theories. I will provide some examples: for instance, sometimes I joke with my friends on social media about a particular topic. Those outside the conversation may not realise that it's a joke and may interpret our comments as serious and spread them as truth. We have no absolute control over this process, which is how false myths and conspiracy theories can emerge.

For millennia, the distinction between orality and writing has been a fundamental aspect of all recorded civilisations. There are various theories regarding the difference between orality and writing, but, as far as I am concerned, the difference lies in the way we learn each. We acquire the words of a language from those around us, often through play as children, in the form of nursery rhymes. Orality is thus learned in a relational and environmental context, as Vygotsky also argued. This explains why orality is inherently tied to the here and now. Writing, on the other hand, is entirely different because it is an organised process, learned sequentially. We do not learn it colloquially from friends or parents, in an emotional setting. Typically, we learn writing in school from an authority figure, such as a teacher. It is in this aspect, I believe, that the main difference between orality and writing resides in the manner in which we learn them. While oral tradition is more democratic and egalitarian, writing has historically been hierarchical. For a long time, only the privileged social classes could read and write, but nowadays almost everyone can do so.

-There is another concept that often recurs in this conversation: the concept of medium, which is one of the most common in communication studies. However, we usually take this concept for granted in our work. In my opinion, considering the concept of 'medium' can be helpful both from a methodological perspective and for understanding what new media are, which otherwise risk becoming the 'new always the same' that Adorno discusses in *Minima Moralia*. How do you see the concept of the medium?

We can consider the concept of medium from various perspectives. From one view, a medium is a device, and this is one way to describe it. However, this description is somewhat simplistic because when Marshall McLuhan -who, in my opinion, remains the most significant media theorist and one of the most important thinkers on the relationship between technology and culture in the twentieth century- states that media are extensions of the human being, I believe this is another crucial point to consider. Media allow people to transcend themselves and reach others, but also to expand their abilities, much like other technologies. The difficulty with understanding media and their role is that we live in a culture where technology and culture are seen as two separate worlds. We tend to make the same distinction between technology and culture as we do between matter and spirit. We often believe they are fundamentally different entities with separate paths: technology relates to practice and the material world, while culture pertains to the spiritual realm. My view is that culture is technology and technology is culture. Technology is an integral

part of our culture, just like all the tools integrated into our daily lives. The essence of the medium lies precisely in this coexistence between culture and technology; it is what best links the abstract world of culture with the tangible world of technology, thus rendering technology a cultural phenomenon. If we think of the medium in these terms, every medium becomes an element of our universe. Every culture has a system of media that shapes its worldview and influences how it perceives itself. As Yuri Lotman stated, every culture needs ways to be aware of its own identity, and media are among these methods. Those who view media solely through a technological lens do not fully grasp what McLuhan meant when he said that every medium contains a message and shapes how we interpret that message. Podcasts differ from radio in how they transmit and organise messages. If we wish to move beyond Arnheim, podcasts, like radio, arrange the soundscape to be accessible to the ear, but they do so in a vastly different way. A podcast is much more akin to a library because it allows the listener to choose what to hear. From a particular perspective, it's similar to radio because it consists of sounds and words. We live in a media landscape where some messages must be more prominent to stand out and be noticed. One of the most effective ways messages emerge in this system is through shouting, as seen, for example, in comments or reviews on *TripAdvisor*. Podcasts, by contrast, do not shout; they have a fixed duration; they represent the expression of a single individual. In a sense, they are comparable to songs.

-This prompts us to explore the different meanings of the term 'concept' and how we understand and use the concept of "medium".

One issue with our theoretical and philosophical framework is that we often use very abstract concepts, assuming they always have the same meaning. Firstly, they do not always have the same meaning: as Lotman pointed out, we live in a polysemic culture. My point, which I believe is original, is that what matters is not just the meaning but also how we use words. Pragmatics, an approach in the philosophy of language that emerged from Austin's theories, should also be applied to concepts, in my view. When we use concepts, we need to consider how and what we aim to achieve with them. For instance, the word "medium" is sometimes used to refer to a particular author (Medium according to McLuhan, medium according to Luhmann). In this case, "medium" is merely a quotation. However, there's also a different use of the word-media can be newspapers, television, or radio. Here, we're referring to content, not just the abstract concept of media. This pragmatic perspective on words is accepted in linguistic theory concerning the performativity of words like commands or oaths. What I am trying to convey is that even the use of concepts has performativity; the way we use a concept influences what we say and communicate. There is also a third perspective. Some concepts lack a clear analytical definition but are vital in everyday life. Siegfried Kracauer, writing about friendship, notes that it is challenging to define friendship. Still, it is one of those words passed down through generations and among the most vital

experiences in human life. We understand what friendship is through experience. Even for the word “media”, I do not always need to explain what it is. I know it is something essential to life, used to convey messages.

-Looking to the future, could you share some insights about your latest works?

Currently, I focus more on the practical side of communication than the theoretical one. I am working extensively on podcasts, particularly a project that aims to spread poetry online among young people aged 12 to 18. It's poetry for young people, for kids who aren't used to reading or listening to poetry. The problem I face now is that communicating education is a significant issue in our society. We need to find ways to transmit knowledge to a generation that doesn't read books, since the traditional education system relies on them. How can we reconsider education when books have lost their central role? We must seek answers to this question. Podcasts could be a solution. However, educational institutions tend to be very conservative and often resist this change strongly. My writing and research differ significantly because I address moral and ethical issues. I have written a book on cowardice and am currently working on one about violence. These books approach these concepts not from a purely theoretical perspective, but from a historical viewpoint.

-Thank you indeed, Professor Ortoleva.

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