

ROBERT KUBEY

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INTERVIEWER: DEE MORGENTHALER

(QUOTE)

I used to say... I don't care so much that kids were spending three hours a day with television, I care about what television they were choosing to look at.

BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT KUBEY

Robert Kubey is Professor and Director of the Center for Media Studies in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. His latest book is "Creating Television: Conversations with the People Behind 50 Years of American TV," with other books including "Media Literacy in the Information Age" and "Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience." He received his doctorate from the Committee on Human Development in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Chicago.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

What inspired your journey in terms of getting to the point of looking at media and media education?

Generally, how did you become involved in media education, if you want to talk a little bit about what got you interested from the start?

Were there certain theoretical inspirations or certain scholars that you were reading at the time that got you thinking about media literacy in education?

Did you have specific goals with your work?

Can you talk a bit about the barriers to media education you spoke of earlier?

Can you elaborate on your philosophical approach to media education?

In terms of the field in general, do you have a feel for where we're going in terms of the scholarly discipline around the subject?

Do you have an opinion of where it is right now? Where it should go or the direction it should go forward?

(Transcript begins here)

DM: *What inspired your journey in terms of getting to the point of looking at media and media education? Generally, how did you become involved in media education, if you want to talk a little bit about what got you interested from the start?*

RK: I had been hearing about it (media education) going back before 1984 or so, and I remember contacting Aimee Dorr, the dean of the Education School at UCLA. Then I saw Aimee Dorr at a conference that was in Gutersloh, Germany, and this was in part looking at media literacy, and there were people from various countries there. These international conferences were very helpful, and for years, and maybe even to this day, to try and sell media literacy in the United States, some of us would bring in people from the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, to do tutorials, to do like a two-day workshop in media literacy. It was as if people were flown in to rescue the backward Americans. The United States has not led the way in media literacy education.

So I started looking into it and I felt strongly that it was an important cause. I learned enough about it to write my first article on the subject for "Education Week" and that was in 1991, called "The Case for Media Education."

Kathleen Tyner really liked the one-page article and that was encouraging. She had founded Strategies for Media Literacy some years before. The article then got republished a number of times. And from then on, I was fairly active in working in the area.

I've published four or five general articles in "Education Week" and other periodicals outside of the field. And I've published a number of research related articles.

Frank Baker and I did a paper called "Obstacles to Media Literacy" in which we looked at all 50 states in terms of whether they had state standards calling for the critical study of media in students. Frank did most of the work I must say. The article was well received and republished a number of times.

Some years later, I got a fellowship at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania to look at the obstacles to the development of media literacy in the United States. I wrote about why it's difficult to get media literacy curricula in schools.

Renee Hobbes and I started a media literacy series for Lawrence Erlbaum where in various authors would write their own volumes. We published five volumes.

DM: *Were you teaching at Rutgers when you got started?*

RK: Yes, I was. I've been at Rutgers since 1985.

DM: *Were there certain theoretical inspirations or certain scholars that you were reading at the time that got you thinking about media literacy in education?*

RK: Len Masterman had published his book then and I found it to be very useful. He is someone I've admired for a long time. I also admired Kathleen Tyner for publishing *Strategies in Media Literacy*. Renee Hobbs and I were both fellows in media literacy at the University of Pennsylvania. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who was the dean of the Annenberg School and one of the most powerful voices in media studies decided the first year of the Annenberg Scholars Program would focus on media literacy. Five scholars spent a semester at the University of Pennsylvania at the Annenberg School. The fellowship was helpful in getting the group of us to work on media literacy together, but mostly to publish articles or books on the subject. In a book called *Media Literacy in the Information Age*, I published chapters by all five of the fellows and a great many more.

As a result of the Annenberg School's media literacy scholars program, Renee Hobbs and I launched a media literacy series of books published under the Lawrence Erlbaum imprint.

DM: *Did you have specific goals with your work? I know you were talking about the barriers to media literacy. Did you have specific goals in mind?*

RK: Right. I recognized that there was a real importance to the field, but a status in schools that that hadn't yet been fully realized. Indeed, most schools were doing no media education at all.

DM: *Can you talk a bit about the barriers to media education?*

RK: They're best covered in the two articles I've written on that subject. There was an important conference that was held in Guelph, Canada, where I first met Renee Hobbes and David Considine and others. I did taped interviews with all of them precisely on the topic of why they thought media education had been so slow to develop in the United States. What were the barriers? And also what their experience had been in their countries.

David Considine told me that in Australia, and this is true for Canada as well, that a force or lever that helped jump start media education was the tremendous amount of U.S. media, especially television coming into their countries.

We're all English speaking countries, of course, and they see an awful lot of our programs and we see almost none of theirs. And that makes for a certain amount of, if not anti-Americanism, a protectionist attitude in Australia and Canada.

One of their media education goals was for kids to analyze, in part, what messages were coming from the United States and what values in TV programs were Australian values or

Canadian values versus U.S. values. Many of which are, of course, the same but some were a tad different.

And so this flooding of their countries with U.S. television programs served as a lever for Australians and the Canadians, a lever we in the U.S. did not have because our television and other media are not being overwhelmed by another media system.

American programs, particularly dramatic one-hour programs, were often doing their shooting in Vancouver because it was cheaper to get crews up in Vancouver than it was in and around Los Angeles or other U.S. locations.

They would actually put U.S. mailboxes out in these locales and remove the Canadian ones so it would look like a U.S. location and this just really pissed off the Canadians, as you can understand. An example I often use is to imagine if 50 percent of the media coming into the United States was Australian or Japanese and what that might feel like.

I would some times get into a bit of trouble in the early days when I was speaking about this at a conference and I would talk about "American values." What I meant was "United States values" and I would upset the Canadians a bit who, of course, would point out that they were also part of North America. I learned that I should not assume that the United States was all of America.

Another obstacle is the lack of solid quantitative "before-after" studies looking at the efficacy of media literacy instruction and whether students' scores on a number of outcome variables such as "critical thinking" increased after they had received media literacy training.

But what outcome measures exist are often reported in media literacy journals or newsletters or things like that and they don't hit the mainstream. The majority of studies use qualitative rather than quantitative measures. Much as I've published other scholars' qualitative studies, I think in the U.S. it will be quantitative measures that will win the day. If you could show that there was some statistically significant spillover effect from media literacy instruction that also helped general reading or writing scores you could sell media literacy like hotcakes.

To my mind, if a number of studies showed real statistically significant improvement in students' critical thinking or reading and writing skills--using quantitative measures--that you could sell media literacy like hotcakes. Or at least get education schools in the country to sit up and take notice and begin to consider teaching media literacy in their schools.

This is a huge barrier. If it could be overcome, media literacy would find a place in our schools. But unless media literacy is mandated in states' standards it is not likely that media education will be taught in education schools. And even when it is mandated, in most states there is no requirement that it actually be taught.

Another big obstacle is teachers' reluctance to add still another element to the curriculum. They're already asked to teach to meet many standards and adding another meets with resistance.

They're always being told to teach more stuff and it's not very often the case that something's pulled out of all the curriculum that teachers need to teach, so they feel overburdened and they feel under-appreciated across the different fields.

Then you come along with this thing called media literacy, and actually sometimes if you teach it the way it's taught some places, you would say that one of the things you want kids to be able to critique are the textbooks themselves. A lot of teachers aren't keen on kids questioning the textbook or questioning *them*. But that's part of critical thinking about media and about what media are conveying information to children. There's advertising on TV and there are movies and there are video games and all these other things.

People in schools might say "We don't want children watching more television. We don't want to bring television into our school."

Children are spending an average of three hours a day with television. When you look at all media combined it comes up that the average kid is spending something like seven hours a day in contact with media, so that includes video games, surfing internet sites, chat-rooms, all this other stuff.

Then when you look at kids multitasking: listening to music at the same time that they're goofing around with a video game, or things like that, the number of hours in contact with media exceeds seven hours. It gets to be an enormous amount of time, so many of us think schools should address this.

But schools are too overwhelmed already to address the standard curricula, and then there's the real snob effect where people say, "Oh, we sure don't want to talk about television, and certainly not video games, in our classrooms."

And many teachers, some older teachers, are sort of more set in their ways, and they don't want to try to learn a whole new curriculum or part of a new curriculum which media literacy, or media education represents.

And then some people scoff at the term, "media literacy." They go, "What do you mean being literate? Literacy is about reading. It's not about reading television."

DM: Can you elaborate on your philosophical approach to media education?

It's important to recognize at this point that there are a couple types of media literacy. There's a protectionist side, which is saying, "Television's bad, video games are bad. We need to protect our children" -- the inoculationist view says that we need to inoculate our children against the media.

But then there's the cultural studies approach, which celebrates the media or wants to look at how the media positions different subjects. It's not about condemning the media.

And so you can have many positive things that are said about media, and then there are the people who, as part of the curriculum are teaching kids to be more selective and discriminating, and that would include me. I used to say I didn't care so much that kids were spending three hours a day with television, it's what television they were choosing to look at.

So I was sort of being a snob and a protectionist in my own right. So then there are people who cross over and do both sides, and I think both sides need to be counted on. To use a technical term, for me, and I'm joking now, it's a mushy field. It's a soft field, and so then it's easily attacked by people who don't know very much about it and scoff at the term media literacy. With the rise of the internet, "digital literacy" is probably an easier sell.

DM: *In terms of the field in general do you have a feel for where we're going in terms of the scholarly discipline around the subject? Do you have an opinion of where it is right now? Where it should go or the direction it should go forward?*

RK: When one looks at other English speaking countries, we are the furthest behind in media literacy education.

Education schools just don't teach media literacy. But when you can't sell it very well at the university level people ask, "Where are the next media literacy teachers going to come from?"

If it's not being taught in education schools, where's it going to be taught? That's partly because there aren't many people who've got their PhDs in media education and there is no place that offers a PhD in media literacy to my knowledge.

Interestingly, private schools have had much more leeway to teach about media and values and things like that, whereas public schools are further behind.