

ELIZABETH THOMAN

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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

Until the internet came along, everything was about television. As long as media literacy was about television, it could be dismissed as not being very important because television was not being used by educated people (or so they say!). But as soon as the internet hit everyday grassroots families, then we transformed into a totally different culture – and media literacy became a critical skill for learning to live in that mediated culture.

BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH THOMAN

Elizabeth Thoman now devotes her time and photographic talent to Healing Petals, a collection of unique photographs to stimulate meditation, reflection and prayer, as well as to media literacy issues. She founded *Media&Values* Magazine in 1977, and the Center for Media Literacy in 1989. She is one of four founders of the Partnership for Media Education, formed in 1997 to promote professional development in the field through organizing and hosting the National Media Education Conference. In 2001 PME evolved into a national membership organization, the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) which was renamed the National Association for Media Literacy Education. In 2002, Thoman received the Daniel J. Kane Lifetime Achievement Award from the University of Dayton (OH) and in 2006 received the Leaders in Learning Award from Cable in the Classroom for a lifetime of leadership in media literacy education. A Roman Catholic nun since 1964, she is a member of the progressive Sisters of the Humility of Mary, Davenport, Iowa. She began her career as a journalism and English teacher.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

How did you become involved in media education?

Now, would you say then that this was your goal...to build understanding that media IS our culture and that we really have to understand the implications of that?

What were some milestones that you noted along the way, for yourself and for the field?

What were some other early influences?

Was there any effort to actually create classroom curriculum?

Why do you think media literacy developed in other countries but not so much in the U.S.?

What about the educational philosophy of the field? Was there any attempt to try to unify all these individual efforts pedagogically?

Do you feel like the field has moved in the direction you were hoping for and that you think is best?

What were some surprises along the way?

When you look forward, are there some things you'd like to see happen?

(Interview Text Begins)

TJ: How did you become involved in media education?

ET: I didn't, it involved me... When I got interested in what we now call media literacy education, the field didn't even exist. It was just something I was interested in. I later learned other people were interested in it too but in the early 1970s, none of us knew each other.

As a Catholic sister, I had been a high school teacher – English, Journalism, Religion – and I had had some experience in using media in the classroom and involving my students in some simple media projects. One Saturday in 1969 I remember transporting my ten journalism students to a nearby college campus where a speaker named Marshall McLuhan was delivering a lecture. None of us, including myself, really knew what he was talking about but somehow I felt he was important and wanted my students to hear him!

Thanks to the controversies McLuhan generated, the topic of “media and technology” and its impact in people's lives, was moving from the back burner to the front in American society. Most of the critique was negative – Peggy Charron was fighting with the FTC about children's advertising on television; the movie *Network* had coined the phrase about television, “I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore.” FCC Chairman Newton Minow had excoriated the TV industry by calling American broadcasting a “vast wasteland.” Most educators agreed. they saw little redeeming social value in most of media, especially television. And new technology? It was a mystery.

After a couple years of teaching high school, I was offered a job in California at a Catholic film studio that was creating innovative films for religious education. Each was short, less than 10 minutes, and designed to stimulate discussion and conversation in the classroom. It was film that didn't give answers

but tried to raise questions. They took the religious education world by storm and were very successful in progressive Catholic and even Protestant educational circles.

So whenever I heard teachers (or anyone) slamming “the media,” I was perplexed because I had personal experience that media products like the short films we were creating COULD be very effective in helping young people wrestle with issues that were important to them. It seemed to me that just dismissing media per se was not a smart thing to do. But I didn’t know how to convince people otherwise. It was just a gut instinct.

TJ: So how did you deal with that?

ET: In 1976, I enrolled in grad school at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. I thought I might get some clues about how to better integrate media into education, into family life, into society at large. Things began to click when I took a class taught by the charismatic Dr. Richard Byrne called *Communication and Social Values*. It was a seminar course -- Dr. Byrne would pose questions about communications issues and then the class would spend 3 hours exploring and discussing the pros and cons.

One night he explained how the Japanese were developing 1/2” video tape recorders. (Remember the first VCRs used 2” tapes and the equipment was humongous and not at all useable in schools). He asked – if in the near future, you could buy a highly portable 1/2” VCR at an affordable price of say, \$150, at K-Mart -- what would you use it for? Where would the tapes come from? How would they be distributed? (Blockbuster had yet to be invented!) Some of my classmates immediately thought of pornography! Others thought movies might be put on tape for screening in the home. There was conversation about advertising and about issues of ownership. I suggested that the VCR might very well replace the 16mm film projector in classrooms. Educational film was big business in more progressive schools. Certainly the films I had been working on the last few years could be distributed on tape. I thought if a smaller VCR would be easier for teachers to use, then maybe more of them would use media resources in the classroom to engage their students more effectively.

There were other issues we discussed in that class too. The desktop computer was a new idea. Cable television. The introduction of broadcast satellites bringing education to parts of the world that didn’t even have telephones. For me the course was an exciting time of discovery. But I had no idea how foundational it would turn out to be.

TJ: You mean Media&Values?

ET: Yes. I think you know the story. One night Dr. Byrne asked us to come back the next week with an idea for a culminating project. I thought and thought and finally decided I’d start a magazine for teachers – to try to prepare them for the world to come, the media culture that was evolving. It would be called *Media&Values* because it would “explore the values questions raised by the transition from the Industrial Age to the coming Information Age.” I didn’t presume to know the answers to the questions, I just wanted a forum (for myself if no one else) where we could explore, wrestle with, try to figure out the implications of this coming shift. I figured there were people who could write on one topic or another and we could publish them and get a conversation going.

Dr. Byrne just said, “Turn the first issue in for credit.” I did and got an A! *Media&Values* continued for 63 quarterly issues until 1994.

TJ: What did you publish first?

ET: The year before I had given a presentation at the annual convention of the National Catholic Education Association which I called “Television and Listerine: I hate it but I love it.” It was my first attempt to articulate this dilemma about the potential power of media and technology to educate and inform but at the same time be so problematic. I decided this would be the key article in the first issue. It was like laying down a gauntlet.

TJ: Was that the beginning of media education?

ET: Not specifically. In the speech, I proposed that we needed teachers who knew how to deal with the media and to help kids who were growing up in a more mediated world. I didn’t have a name for it, I think I called it “media awareness”... and I certainly didn’t have a program for it! I was just trying to raise consciousness about a new kind of teaching in the world to come.

TJ: ...and what year was that, Liz?

ET: The speech was in the spring of 1976; the first issue of *Media&Values* was fall, 1977. I had kept that speech realizing that it could be an article in a magazine. I didn’t think I’d have to create the magazine, too!

TJ: But it was a kind of recognition, a kind of turning point in recognition awareness.

ET: It probably was but I don’t think I recognized it was a turning point, I was just trying to articulate what I had instinctively come to -- that education and educators needed to do something about preparing the next generations to live and learn in a mediated world. And it had to be positive, not negative.

TJ: Now, would you say then that this was your goal...to build understanding that media IS our culture and that we really have to understand the implications of that?

ET: Right. I think I’m the one that coined the use of the word “navigate” – we have to teach young people (and ourselves) how to *navigate* media culture. As I said, most people took “navigate” to mean “avoid” – how do you avoid the danger in the rocky shore? How do you “tame” media’s “powerful” influence? I didn’t buy that. I knew effective teaching is never about avoidance, it’s about creatively exploring and implementing new ideas in one’s world.

TJ: Well along that line, what were some milestones that you noted along the way, for yourself and for the field? Maybe the best way to approach it, is to share your story in terms of how you went along after founding Media&Values. That will help provide some perspective in terms of your early experiences as well as some of the things that may have later on turned out to be milestones.

ET: Well, one of the greatest influences, right about that same time, ‘76-77, was in the Protestant church world. The Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians all had very professional communications programs and often worked jointly with the National Council of Churches. They

published magazines, produced television shows, radio productions, etc. Led by the prophetic Dr. Everett Parker of the United Church of Christ, they also had a very active advocacy presence with the FCC and the media industry around issues of “representation” in the media – gender, race, age, ethnicity—as well as economic and ownership concerns. In the early 70s, several denominations jointly created a non-profit organization to be an umbrella for projects that they could do together – thus saving duplication of cost and having more impact. It was called the Media Action Research Center (MARC) and the first project was an education program known as Television Awareness Training or “T.A.T.”

The plan was to find and train a team of regional trainers who in turn would do workshops and programs for parents and teachers at the local grassroots church level. The program would have a comprehensive book for participants and a collection of film clips from TV and movies for trainers to use to spark discussion. Do you remember seeing the books in our library?

TJ: Yes I do.

ET: Well MARC was in the midst of writing it and asked me to help create the program. But they had no money to pay me so I couldn’t take it -- they all had paid staff positions with their denominational offices so it wasn’t a problem for them.

TJ: Yes, the freelancers’ dilemma!

ET: But we stayed in touch and I contributed several small pieces to the book. I also took the T.A.T leader training. In retrospect I think the book itself and the process of working on it helped refine some of the things I felt merited further exploration in *Media&Values*. So Television Awareness Training was one important milestone.

TJ: What were some other early influences?

ET: In the world of *public* education, there were a number of other initiatives in the late 1960’s and early 1970s that contributed seeds to what has become the media literacy movement. Many of these were highly localized – usually one or maybe several teachers who created innovative programs to involve students in media projects – making Super 8 films, creating slide shows, even building small broadcast studios and involving students in creating and producing morning news shows or broadcasting sports to the local community.

A good example is the work done by teachers and parents in the Larchmont/Mamoroneck school district just north of New York City. In the early 1960’s, supported by progressive administrators, they actually built a small broadcast studio in an elementary school and even involved first graders in producing a morning news show. There’s a famous photograph of a 10-year old standing on a stack of *books* to peer through the viewfinder of studio camera on a rolling tripod! In her book, *Children of Telstar*, Kate Moody, who was one of the community volunteers who helped design and implement the program over several years, tells the whole story – it’s pretty fascinating.

Many of these 1960s teachers were themselves influenced by the magazine *Media&Methods*, a controlled circulation publication that served the burgeoning Audio-Visual and Instructional Media departments in public schools and school districts at the time. But in the midst of all the ads for overhead projectors and TV carts were some great articles about kids making Super-8 movies and teachers using media in the classroom. I was an avid *Media&Methods* reader myself when I was teaching and like many readers, I’m sure, felt that the magazine validated my early instincts about media as a creative educational agenda. I

guess it also impressed on me the power of the printed word as a way to disseminate new ideas about education!

TJ: Was there any effort to actually create classroom curriculum?

ET: One extremely interesting project I found out about a few years ago actually came from the middle of the heartland – outside of Des Moines, Iowa -- not far from where I had taught a few years earlier. Apparently Vice President Spiro Agnew visited Iowa in 1970 and delivered a speech where he used his famous phrase “nattering nabobs of negativity” to describe the so-called “liberal” news media. Two highschool teachers from Red Bud, Iowa decided that if the growing media world was such a problem, they ought to be teaching their students about it.

Eventually they secured a Title III grant from the United States Office of Education (USOE) under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to support the prototyping, research, evaluation, and dissemination of *Media Now*, a pioneering curriculum that covered everything from how cameras worked and production basics to genre study, analyzing visuals and developing criteria for evaluating media messages. It was rather amazing!

But the program’s uniqueness was its three large cardboard boxes containing 50 self-contained learning activity packages — each containing materials, resources, and directions to complete a specific instructional exercise. The boxes could be delivered to any classroom as a permanent placement or transported from site to site within a school or district. I have been told that over 500 copies of the program were manufactured by hand and sold to schools throughout the US about the same time that *Media&Values* was being gestated. I had never heard of it at the time but there is one copy in our archives and it’s a fabulous artifact of early attempts at curriculum development!

A later attempt was a 4-part *Critical Viewing Curriculum* (elementary, high school, college and adult, I believe) funded by the U.S. Department of Education itself with the help of several universities and regional educational labs. It had a copyright date of 1980 and had the potential to be influential nationally but if you recall who was elected president in 1980? -- Ronald Reagan -- and what his educational philosophy was? – “back to the basics” – anything as innovative as “critical viewing” just never found a foothold in U.S. educational policy even though at the very same time in Canada, Australia, England and many other countries, media literacy was really taking off. Indeed, a year or two after it was published the curriculum was awarded one of the infamous “Golden Fleece Awards” for wasting tax-payer money to “teach kids to watch television.”

TJ: Why do you think media literacy developed in other countries but not so much in the U.S.?

ET: Others may have their own insights but there are two that I think are the most significant. The first was the growing influence of U.S. media around the world in the 1970s. I first became aware of this through the broad religious community I talked about earlier. There are two international religious organizations that operate in the field of media. One was called “UNDA” – a Catholic organization and the other is the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) that at the time was headquartered in London. Funded heavily by European churches, both WACC and UNDA helped to organize many projects in what we then called the Third World – to foster the use of communications technology for building community and giving people a voice in their own future.

This was necessary because as television spread around the world, few countries had the trained personnel or the educational and economic infrastructure to produce their own programs about their own issues or

culture. The U.S. media industry, of course, stepped in to fill this void by repackaging Hollywood movies and network TV programs and selling them cheaply. “Who shot J.R.?” was probably the first “cliffhanger” recognized everywhere around the world!

Educational leaders everywhere quickly realized their own cultures (and cultural values) were in danger of being lost in this onslaught of thousands of hours of U.S. “story-telling.” It appears that media literacy was born simultaneously in dozens of countries all through the 1980s. When I went to a UNESCO sponsored-conference on media education in Toulouse, France in 1989, I was stunned to meet teachers from 30 or 40 countries all carrying around published textbooks and teaching materials in their own languages. The next year when I went to Manila for a WACC congress, I met hundreds more *religious* educators and communicators with a similar commitment to media education.

What became obvious to me was that almost everywhere outside the U.S., educators had taken what was a *negative* problem for their cultures (loss of cultural values) and transformed it into a *positive* program of educational awareness and insight.

The U.S. of course, didn’t recognize television as a cultural invasion because it was *our* media. Stories reflected the world outside our windows, at least to some extent. We were blind to the extent that visual media was transforming the culture and values of American life.

But the greatest issue in the U.S. was simply size. Unlike other countries which have maybe a few thousand schools all teaching from a national curriculum, the U.S. education system is organized locally – 50 states with 160,000 independent school districts, 4 million teachers, 50 million students...we still see it today... very little gets done quickly or efficiently. Media literacy didn’t have a chance until the Internet transformed everything – and then suddenly the importance of teaching “21st century skills” became obvious – and critical. It’s just media literacy wrapped up in a new package – and improved of course by time and experience.

TJ: So was anything going on in the U.S. in the 1980s ?

ET: Well lots of things were happening but not in any coherent way across the country. For example, more people in education began to explore the potential of television and visual media in how children learn-- especially after *Sesame Street* became such a success. But this was about *using media to teach* rather than teaching about media itself.

There was a growing citizen activism around media issues – cable access, advertising to children, depiction issues (race, gender, etc.) which helped build awareness by parents and teachers of the influence of economic and political forces in what appeared on television.

And with the arrival of lightweight video systems and the rise of community television stations and access channels provided by cable companies, everyday citizens began to make their own video and produce programming. This demystified the whole production process for people of all ages. In schools, the field of instructional technology developed to also teach production skills and many gained support because they could be justified as job and career training.

Perhaps the most significant work with school children was Foxfire --a teaching experiment that came out Appalshop, a regional media arts center in Kentucky. And I should also mention the work of what is now called the National Telemedia Council in Madison, Wisconsin, founded by a group of women more than

50 years ago to promote education by and about television and media. They've been a small but mighty force in raising awareness, developing workshops for teachers, publishing and networking.

Kathleen Tyner once wrote an article about the media education field using the analogy of the blind men and the elephant. Each one touches one part of the elephant -- the trunk, an ear, a leg -- and thinks that's what an elephant is. Of course, they're all missing the big picture.

I don't believe educators missed the big picture because of any real fault or even blindness. The enormity of the cultural shift driven by ever new technology along with the sheer geographical size of the American landscape made it impossible for *any* one person, group or organization to get a handle on everything that was happening.

Plus no one had a mandate, much less the time and travel money, to think or organize nationally. I was lucky, I guess, that *Media&Values*, gave me a perfect excuse to try to find out who was doing what where. Our subscription list was really the first collection of names and addresses of people interested in media education – which, of course, was useful a few years later when we started holding conferences. In the late '80s we were printing about 5000 copies of every issue. In 1994 when we stopped publishing, it was over 10,000.

TJ: What about the educational philosophy of the field? Was there any attempt to try to unify all these individual efforts pedagogically?

ET: Looking back, I see now a struggle to identify what were the core issues for the US. What could / should kids actually be taught? There was a LOT of concern in the culture about the influence of television and advertising on children and how to “protect” them from any potential harm. This concern would evolve ultimately into the “protectionist” approach in the 1990s. Peggy Charren at Action for Children's Television, the PTA, the American Pediatric Association all developed advocacy positions and got a lot of headlines so that whenever anyone said “media education,” there was a tendency to confuse it as advocacy for or against some aspect of media.

But the Canadians, and educators in England, too, kept pushing us not to fall into the protectionist trap -- what they called “moral panics.” The Canadian movement was heavily influenced by Toronto native Marshall McLuhan and led by classroom English teachers in Toronto who saw films and TV shows and ads as a new kind of “text” that needed to be analyzed just like print texts. This was a new idea for the U.S. but as a former English teacher myself, it made sense to me and was influential in developing the editorial policy for *Media&Values* which ultimately produced a third approach to media education – a recognition of issues, yes, but in an analytical approach that uncovered the complex economic, political, social and cultural connections involved. We didn't take positions but tried to understand and help readers understand that simply “banning” media products -- or television itself-- was ultimately not effective.

For this, media educators were seen as advocacy “wimps” which made it harder to be taken seriously by the news media (always looking for controversy), the foundation community (which began to tie funding to behavioral change) or the organizations that were grabbing headlines with their “sky is falling” press releases.

At the same time, without a comprehensive, researched-based curriculum (which takes years to do and millions of dollars), the professional world of American education – state and district leaders who wrote policy that controlled what teachers were expected to do in the classroom -- could easily ignore any call for media education as not being educationally sound.

TJ: Sounds like a no-win situation!

ET: On the surface it was. And there were dark days. But at the same time, the 80s were some of the most intellectually challenging years for me. Through some of my feminist and religious connections I began to read the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire whose book, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, talked about education as “banking” (depositing facts for later recall/withdrawal) rather than empowering people to think for themselves. The Liberation Theology movement, also out of Latin America, further offered a model for empowerment that is applicable in any society to any topic from scripture study to school reform. It’s a 4-step process of Awareness – Analysis – Reflection – Action.

TJ: That’s the Empowerment Spiral. How did you make the connection?

ET: I remember precisely where I was in 1986 when I had a great “aha” and connected the exploration of media issues with the process of educational change and reform. I was reading a book about social analysis and it dawned on me that if we could apply an educationally sound process of inquiry to media issues, then we finally had a foundation to build curriculum around. I further realized that education in a media world would not be about teaching *facts* but about exploring *questions*. So teachers didn’t have to know all the answers, they just needed to know how to ask the right questions to get students thinking!

Then I thought... *Media&Values* could become a resource for learning how to ask the right questions! The whole mission of the magazine shifted and it became a vehicle for helping readers learn to ask questions about all the media issues facing us in the late 20th century -- advertising and consumerism, the trivialization of news, sexism in the media, ageism, ethnicity and race, violence – the topics were almost unlimited. At one time we had 20 file drawers chock full of newspaper clippings and highlighted articles and book reviews and half-done interviews and teaching ideas...we collected cartoons too because sometimes a cartoon could raise a question better than words could. We added columnists from different fields and a two-page tear-out with a teachable activity for the classroom.

That’s when *Media&Values* began to take off because people saw something practical coming out of it.

TJ: Yes, well and it brought a lot of people together and it got a lot done.

ET: I feel really privileged to have been part of that part of history. There were a lot of late nights but it was rewarding especially when we got a congratulatory letter from Bill Moyers (we framed it!) or a \$5000 check from a foundation. My rolodex was a hodgepodge of Catholic and Protestant communicators, film teachers, foundation executives, journalists and TV broadcasters, advocacy groups, authors, media professors and, of course, anyone trying to actually do something in the field. Somehow it all worked.

Meeting so many people around the US and from different countries was also exciting... and satisfying, too. Many are still good friends. I remember going on a trip to London in I guess it was ‘85. I had heard that the British Film Institute was developing some media education resources so I looked up their address and kind of knocked on the door and said “Hello.” Cary Bazalgette, now head of the BFA’s media education program, invited me for tea at her home and we talked for hours. She told me about work going on in Australia – and Canada. That was my first introduction to what was developing in Canada.

TJ: What are some of the highlights of the 90s?

ET: There are so many – we were really galloping along...

In 1990 we added a Leader's Guide with lesson plans to each thematic issue of *Media&Values* and called it a "Media Literacy Workshop Kit." The kids were the first generation of teaching tools created for use in the US and we sold thousands of them on topics like sexism in the media, media and politics, parenting in a TV age and finally *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in Media*, which became a blockbuster in the field.

- The kits were not full-blown curricula but more like individual units built on an underlying pedagogy of the Empowerment Spiral and Five Core Concepts of Media Education, which we adapted from the Canadians' original version of eight "Key Concepts."
- The Canadians sponsored their first big conference in the summer of 1990. 500 Canadian teachers came but only 15 of us came from the U.S. Two years later a second conference drew 500 Canadians along with 50 Americans. By 1995, there was enough involvement to start holding conferences in the US – and there have been over a dozen since.
- The Aspen Institute's Leadership Conference brought 25 leaders in the field together in late 1992 to hammer out some definitions and guiding principles – and introduce us to one another! The resulting report from the weekend was a major document for the field even today.
- Following up her pledge at the Aspen Conference, Renee Hobbs directed the first week-long summer institute for teachers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1993. It set the model for many other conferences for teaching teachers how to integrate media literacy across the curriculum.
- Although it started out modestly in 1990, the Center for Media Literacy's mail-order Media Literacy Resource Distribution Service gathered teaching materials from dozens of publishers into an annual catalog many called an "illustrated bibliography" of the field. For many time-strapped teachers, it was a boon to be able to get everything from one place on one purchase order.
- And then in 1997 came the formation of the Partnership for Media Education (PME) by four women leaders in the field– Lisa Reisberg (Miller) of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Nancy Chase (Garcia) from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Renee Hobbs and myself. PME was chartered to coordinate professional development conferences to advance the field. By 2001 it evolved into a professional membership association -- the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA). Now it's NAMLE – the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

TJ: That really captures a lot of the early development of the field and how things came along. Maybe we can switch gears and talk about what you see happening now. Do you feel like the field has moved in the direction you were hoping for and that you think is best?

ET: Well, I don't know if I even knew what we were hoping for...it just seemed the right thing to do, to keep on keeping on. Looking back on 30 years I don't see very many wrong turns. I think the directions

we took as *Media&Values*, then the Center for Media and Values (1989) and finally the Center for Media Literacy (1994) helped the field find a foothold in American education even though it took 30 years.

The big challenge was (and is) to keep our spirits up when funding was tight and we had to lay off staff or drop projects. Ceasing publication of *Media&Values* after 15 years was really a blow, but it was the right thing to do at the time. Not having to meet quarterly publication deadlines opened up time to explore what was to be a critical next phase of the field -- an emphasis on professional development and teacher training. With support from TV producer Norman Felton, we developed the Felton Media Literacy Scholars Program (1996 -1998) as a first attempt at working with teachers. For many reasons it was not sustainable but through it we learned better what would be needed to prepare teachers for teaching in a 21st century media culture.

TJ: For you, what were some surprises along the way? When you think back on things, do you say, “Oh my gosh! Wow! I never expected that?”

ET: Yes I think even now I’m amazed by the number of people that subscribed to *Media&Values* and how widely influential it was. Renee (Hobbs) told me that in 1986, she picked up a copy in the University of Michigan library and said to herself – “I want to know who’s doing this?” We’ve been friends for 20 years. Because I loved doing the magazine and it consumed more than 15 years of my life (1977 – 1994), *Media&Values* is probably the project I am most proud of -- and it absolutely delights me that it was so helpful to others.

Then the national conference we hosted here in Los Angeles at UCLA in 1996 was a wonderful surprise. It was a gathering of nearly 400 people in U.S. media literacy – many who met each other for the first time. I remember opening the conference with the comment, “Wow, this is like my rolodex come to life!” We didn’t have people submit presentations as NAMLE does now. Rather my staff was great at mining the Southern California media community for speakers and panelists. We had a panel of media critics – Elvis Mitchell, Howard Rosenberg, Ella Taylor. We worked with the Writer’s Guild to put together panel of TV writers with high school teachers who were teaching film-making. It went two hours overtime and everyone missed lunch but they wouldn’t stop talking! Renee did the opening address and that’s where she first outlined her “7 Great Debates in Media Literacy.” That was (and is) one of the most important documents about the media literacy field, I think.

Just one more! The coming together of the founding board of AMLA was a delight. Faith Rogow was very instrumental in pushing us forward and saying it was time for a national organization. I was surprised; I didn’t think it would happen so soon. But in every meeting of the board, no matter how difficult the issues were that we had to face, there was so much respect for each other’s expertise and contributions! We had fun, too! All of that board continue to be dear friends.

TJ: When you look forward, are there some things you’d like to see happen?

ET: Well you know since I pulled back considerably, I’m not as up to date on what’s going on. And that’s ok. In my religious community (Sisters of the Humility of Mary) there is a tradition of encouraging and supporting sisters to do innovative things, especially in education. And then when the idea or project is ready to be turned over to competent people who can move it forward, we move on to the next challenge.

I always said I'd stay with the Center until "media literacy" becomes a household word. There were many years when I'd say it, and people would say, "Huh?" Now the idea of media literacy education is widespread. I'm content to have contributed a few steps toward where field is now and I'm confident this generation of teachers and leaders will take it wherever it needs to go.

TJ: Well it's interesting, I remember at one of the meetings of the Felton Scholars, somebody brought up the question of what's next. I remember saying and thinking that our job is to make sure that media literacy becomes part of everyday life, it's something that's happening all the time.

ET: And what made that happen was the internet. Until the internet came along, everything was about television. As long as media literacy was about television, it could be dismissed as not being very important because television was not being used by educated people (or so they say!).

But as soon as the internet hit everyday grassroots families, then we transformed into a totally different culture. It took a while for many of us to realize how important the shift was, except that I had some sense of it because of my work at Annenberg. In cleaning out my files recently, I came across a speech I gave in the 80s where I talked about in the future we'd have hand-held screens... mobile devices... I didn't know it was going to be a phone but that's what it's turned out to be. When I came across it I thought, "Geez, did I write that?" I guess I must have, it was in my handwriting.