

RENEE CHEROW-O'LEARY

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INTERVIEWER: DEE MORGENTHALER

(Quote)

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### BIOGRAPHY OF RENEE CHEROW-O'LEARY

**Renée Cherow-O'Leary** is President of Education for the 21st Century, a media consulting group in New York City which develops curriculum and educational materials primarily for children, parents and teachers in multiple platforms, conducts qualitative research, and develops conceptual "white papers" for non-profit and for-profit educational organizations. Among other university appointments, Dr. O'Leary has served as professor of English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University and as a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. She began her career in newspaper reporting and children's book publishing.

### 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?***

***So, McLuhan and Postman were inspiring your work. Anyone else that you can remember that kind of inspired your interest or events that were going on at the time that pushed you in that direction?***

***Were there obstacles or surprises along the way that effected your teaching efforts - different viewpoints you encountered that affected your work?***

***Can you talk about personal milestones or milestones that you see in terms of your work in Media Literacy and Media Education -- things that stand out for you as important moments?***

***In terms of the field of media education and media literacy, do you think we've come far enough or that we're moving in the right direction?***

(Interview 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?*

**RC:** I had been working in publishing and became very interested in the newly established public television movement and the success of *Sesame Street* and was fortunate enough to get a job there when it really was a “workshop.” (The organization that produced the show was called Children’s Television Workshop.) I thought these were going to be the future of education. Neil Postman had started a program at New York University in 1970 called Media Ecology. It had no track record whatsoever. He had written a book called "Television and the Teaching of English" which had captured my attention and had written what has now become a classic, "Teaching as a Subversive Activity" around that time. And so, I was drawn to him and rejected the more traditional graduate school PhD programs once I was accepted even though I was offered a fellowship in English Education at another university. For better or worse-- and there were some very wonderful things and some very un-wonderful things about the early years of Media Ecology-- I made my choice at that point to move into that arena and began a more formal study of the impact of media.

The term “ecology” came out of systems thinking, that we are all connected not only people but the earth itself. Books like *The Whole Earth Catalog*, the landing of spacecraft on the moon in 1969, the establishment of the first Earth Day in 1970 and the recognition that our Earth was our fragile little planet became embedded in contemporary consciousness. And so, “ecology” was a hot new word, but no one quite knew what it meant, especially in relation to media. Marshall McLuhan had written his seminal book, *Understanding Media*, in 1964 and his work was also informing thinking about media. Among his ideas was that the medium itself (no matter what its content) was transforming and extending our human nervous system. He said the earth was turning into a global village because of the way we could now reach out to each other and communicate. (Remember this was way before the Internet!) I was totally intrigued at the possibilities this seemed to foreshadow.

So we struggled with defining the term, “media ecology.” It was frustrating and exhilarating to be charting a new field. As we speak, I realize that articulating this personal history is fun because you don't always think about how all the pieces fit together, but between McLuhan (on whom I had written my Master’s Thesis at the University of Chicago), *Sesame Street* and the work of Neil Postman I was really immersed in some of the most forward thinking ideas about media at the time.

**DM:** *So, McLuhan and Postman were inspiring your work. Anyone else that you can remember that kind of inspired your interest or events that were going on at the time that pushed you in that direction?*

**RC:** Well, yes. I mean, there were things going on in New York, like, there was a video production place called Global Village. People were just starting to use portable video equipment. Father John Culkin is gone now. But John Culkin was a huge, larger than life personality and based at this center. It was called the Global Village based on McLuhan's terminology. And so, I went to a lot of lectures and events and that kind of thing. The other thing that happened simultaneously with the creation of the network of PBS stations was the separate creation of cable television, an entirely new series of networks that promised a world of "500 channels." It seemed as if so many of these would be educational. I was thrilled at the prospect of all these outlets for ideas. There were also public access channels mandated by the government to hear the voices of common people who never before would have been able to produce their own programs. It was a heady time.

I for a time had worked for a company directly before *Sesame Street* that was a joining of forces of Time-Life and General Electric. It was called the General Learning Corporation, and Dr. Frank Keppel who had been the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, was the chief officer of that company, General Learning. Time-Life created what today might be called software or the program side of things and GE created some kind of experimental hardware. We were working with people in poverty because there was a lot of emphasis on the war on poverty, and also the promise with cable television meant the potential for education was going to be enormous. And that also was at the start of the '70s. So I have to say there was a lot of ferment in the world of media at that time. And media studies, we take it for granted today but it was not yet a serious academic discipline then. It had to be honed and shaped into an academic discipline.

**DM:** *It seemed to start as a way to engage students, film studies, etc. and then evolved into a more critical stance.*

**RC:** It was an evolving discipline. People that were involved with these media ideas at the time kind of had to find each other. There weren't institutionalized structures for this sort of study not even for film, really, in America. I was involved very early on with the National Council of the Teachers of the English because in my academic work I was teaching literature and English and some of my graduate school mentors were very involved in NCTE (National Council of the Teachers of English). I used to be a member that a group of interested members called The Media Caucus, and there were literally about 15 of us in the room trying to figure out what this was. Media literacy was only a gleam in someone's eye then. There wasn't a language for this kind of study. It had to be invented.

I mean, you could always show movies to make a student interested or a reward on a Friday afternoon in a classroom. But the critique, particularly Postman's view that media were ecological, that the media interpenetrated all areas of culture, was very new at the time. That kind of growing understanding was really behind sophisticated media study among scholars. Maybe, among some people it was kind of fun to have a legitimate reason to show something, but in what we were doing in critique that wasn't going to get

you anywhere. People were upset about it. There were those who felt it was shallow and simplistic. Why, for example, would you show television in school?

New openings started to emerge for gatherings to explore these issues. And soon, given the nature of academic exploration, more and more theories started to emerge. (There was also a lot of worry too that media were going to change the nature of teaching and the primacy of the printed word. Even Postman later in his career retreated from his original embrace of media because he felt it had destroyed the nature of reasoned discourse and instead set people awash in a sea of fragmented, unconnected bits of information. He mourned the linear nature of reasoning and the building of cohesive and persuasive argument.)

So, to explain how it was once the critique and theory started to emerge: Pick your favorite novel. Then, it became more legitimate to compare the film and the book, let's say, and to begin to understand characterization and other things through that. In fact, it was more engaging, definitely. And you could teach Shakespeare and suddenly there was a plethora of plays of Shakespeare that were made into film. By and large, I think it was film and not television that really at that point was the medium of choice for serious academic analysis.

I think that when people began...it's such a long conversation in terms of thinking about it. I would say that film studies, particularly in Europe, has its own cachet-- the French new wave, the Italian films that were suddenly becoming more mainstream. There was serious cross over to America from abroad. People heard of Fellini and Marcello Mastroianni and *La Dolce Vita*. I think that the intellectuals in the universities became very, very interested in film first, and that seemed to have a theoretical gain which you need in a university for film here. And then all this other stuff started, also. People became aware of the value of it especially younger faculty, as I was, who saw a whole new field unfolding before us!

But I can tell you that not everyone in academia felt that way. I taught at City College. It was around 1980, the City University of New York in the English Department. I will never forget one woman standing up. People were talking about using film and she said, "I will never use a film in my class" like it was a corruption and cheapening. And I thought, you know what, you are in the 20th century. But no, no, no she was totally a defender of purity of the printed word. The image was somehow a sleazy, second-rate substitute. There's always been that little strand of thinking about media—that it is cheapening, weakening, impure and possibly detrimental to the students thinking.

**DM:** *That brings me to my next question. Were there obstacles or surprises along the way that effected your teaching efforts - different viewpoints you encountered that affected your work?*

**RC:** Let me think for a second. You know, I guess [laughs] it's a funny question in a way because I gravitated to the people that were excited about the things I was excited

about. And I went to the places where I felt that was happening. So, even though Neil's program was a little bit off the wall in those years in terms of figuring out what we were doing, I preferred to be there than studying Chaucer and the classics at that moment, as much as I loved them and had been trained in them. It was a time of seizing the day. It was our time! And we had something to say! I do love Chaucer but I just made that choice. So, the obstacles for me ... I don't think I had any! I don't remember them, let's put it that way. I would say my obstacles were more personal, I had a child, I was doing doctoral work, I was trying to ... you know the story. And the feminist movement was just taking hold as well, another new consciousness to assimilate fully and act on.

You're doing it. I was working full-time. I was going to school. I was starting a family and that kind of stuff. So, trying to do it all maybe was a little bit of an obstacle. But I'm a pretty optimistic person, I'd say. I am fortunate to say that I feel that I am a confident, thinking person and I did not experience that many obstacles. (It helps to have a very supportive husband who'll take over when you have to study☺) When I was teaching I always looked for a place where they wanted to do English and Media if I could. And I love literature, so I didn't mind doing just the literature but everybody who was an old progressive was kind of opening up to this.

**DM: *Have you always been in New York?***

**RC:** I grew up in New Jersey and always knew I was going to move to NYC as soon as I could. I went to Barnard College undergrad, the women's college at the time of Columbia University. Then, because I got a full fellowship, went to graduate school at the University of Chicago for my Master's, and then I came back to New York and stayed after my doctorate at New York University. My other choices at the time were looking to go possibly either to Stanford or Harvard and then I kind of got caught up in my work and my life in New York and didn't go. But you know, those are the roads not taken, like you say. Had I been at X place or Y place, how would my career have evolved? You just don't know.

**DM: *Can you talk about personal milestones or milestones that you see in terms of your work in Media Literacy and Media Education -- things that stand out for you as important moments?***

**RC:** What happened that was interesting for me was, let's see. All of the years of teaching this and trying to figure it out and creating courses I consider milestones. I'm proud that I was in the forefront in the beginning to teach this stuff along with a lot of other colleagues. But that mattered, creating courses, I love doing that. The other milestone for me was an ironic one. I was in between jobs and sometimes that happens, you know, when one thing ends and the ... And I applied to become the National Coordinator of Creating Critical Viewers at the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. They were just beginning to get into media literacy at the industry level because one of NATAS' board members was very interested in this idea. (Not everyone else in the industry was as enamored of the idea of media literacy—then still a new

concept!) Creating Critical Viewers was an already developed curriculum created by the well-known Yale scholars, Jerome and Dorothy Singer.

And so, I applied for this job, which at the time was advertised as part-time at the Television Academy in New York. And they chose me and I became the Coordinator for a national initiative in 17 cities of this Creating Critical Viewers curriculum and approach. And it was an opportunity for me to expand it. That was in 1995. And that was the time when I actually got to know the Media Literacy community and began my affiliation with the group across the country of broadcasters and educators and cultural leaders such as the leaders of children's museums, libraries—who saw the potential in this new kind of literacy. Many of the people I met then are now leaders in the media literacy movement. I thought, you know, just as I had when we were 15 people in the Media Caucus at the NCTE, that I had found the kindred spirits who were going to pioneer this movement.

That lasted about three years, 1995-1998, and I was traveling all the time and I was meeting people in all these different cities. And my job was as the spokesperson for this Media Literacy project and the concept in general. I spoke to many audiences. And I began to try to make a difference in the cultural institutions of the cities where I felt that Media Literacy would have a natural home.

As I said, this included teachers and schools, libraries, museums, sometimes special film programs or government agencies. And that was my mandate as much as possible. There was a coordinator in every city, so let's say St. Louis, San Francisco, Philadelphia and all the others where NATAS had a chapter around the country. And ironically, some of the people today that I know well in the Media Literacy movement were those coordinators who've now become leaders like Sherri Culver, the head of the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE).

Sherri was the Philadelphia coordinator, Marilyn Cohen of Seattle at the University of Washington Media Literacy program is another and so many other good people who are now part of a media literacy community. So it became, at that time in the mid '90s, Media Literacy was becoming a field unto itself and becoming recognized. I mean, it wasn't so known and understood before that time and again, others such as Renee Hobbs, Liz Thoman and others were creating forums for these ideas to be heard and acted upon.

**DM:** *In terms of the field of media education and media literacy, do you think we've come far enough or that we're moving in the right direction?*

**RC:** I think that Media Literacy has been stagnant. At least ... now, I can't say totally that that's the case. I know there are pockets of very exciting work. I think people like Henry Jenkins have affiliated in some way with Media Literacy and certainly the new Media Literacy's at MIT and USC and all of that are absolutely positive and critical. We need to think much, much larger than has ever been thought about before. It's not about an ad for cosmetics, making women into objects. That was good in the old days. But we have to, again I credit Neil, whose thinking I've realized has pervaded my thinking in many more ways than I ever thought it would! [laughs] But I want to look at it much more

ecologically. Media literacy got very stuck, I think, let's say five years ago. There were principles that came out of media literacy and NAMLE (National Association of Media Literacy Education) has tried to standardize the field and give it a base.

But I don't know, I try ... I feel that we need to think on a much larger scale. Like when I go down to events, for example, in Washington at the Kaiser Family Foundation, I'm struck that the members of Congress, the FTC and so on, are still stuck on the kind of media literacy that, when they mention it, to me is very 20th century. I think media literacy has to connect with "21st Century skills," with new media literacy and the current movements in "new media" and "social media" (these didn't really exist a decade ago!) and with social patterns that are transforming our culture. It has to be a bigger tent. I am a person who tries very hard to think in an interdisciplinary fashion, and so I would like media literacy to link more to other transformative areas in our culture. Whether it's robotics or looking at the nature of avatars and what it means to be human today...

I think these are the kind of media that we're talking about now. Tools like I-PADS and apps are transforming how we acquire and disseminate information. Children in this age are becoming utterly adept at these things at very young ages. We're talking about another kind of literacy. This impacts everything we know about education and learning. I'll say one more thing that might be seen as heretical: in my view, media literacy doesn't pay enough sophisticated attention to the business of media. I work in media. I'm a consultant to many media organizations on educational matters and I feel that certainly in the old days, media literacy tended vilify them all. We have to understand these tools, how they originate, the business of them and then know what we need to teach and explore to help deconstruct for the purpose of understanding and be as strong as anything that's coming out of the media industry in terms of ideas and innovation. The industries themselves are evolving at record speed. We must be as sharp as they and live inside our own creativity and challenges and not just condemn others but find our own NEW voices for this new century.

**DM:** *What an excellent point.*

**Renee:** Because we're in this together in some way. We wouldn't have media literacy if we didn't have media. So my sense is that we need an enlivened true 21st Century media literacy. I've been wanting to write about this. It's like all those things that you think you want to write about. Because the world is moving much faster than media literacy is. I guess that's my point. And there are some key thinkers working on the cutting edge of that domain who are not formally recognized generally as known quantities in the field of media literacy. But they would be, if we decide to think in an interdisciplinary way. I'll give you an example. Recently, there was a conference at Bard College. It's a very avant garde, arts-oriented college about an hour or two out of New York City. The conference had Sherry Turkle as a speaker and a wonderful thinker named Ray Kurzweil whose work I've loved for years. I've always taught Kurzweil in my media studies class, but I never hear him mentioned by most people.

His name is Raymond Kurzweil. He's a futurist and an inventor. He's written books called "The Singularity Is Near," "The Age of Intelligent Machines," "The Age of

Spiritual Machines." The conference at Bard was about being human in an inhuman age. I ultimately couldn't go, but it was streamed and it's online. What is humanity now when soon we will be able to implant chips in our brains and we're partly robotic already and cybernetic or whatever we want to call ourselves? What does it mean to be human?

You see, those are the questions that engage me. I want to know, not just should I turn on this tele program or that program. That's OK, but I want to know what our media are doing to our consciousness. I was a major in philosophy and English, and as I get older, the philosophical questions are more important to me than the literal ones.

I thank you for letting me expound. If you don't say these things out loud, they just kind of rattle around in your brain.

**DM:** *Right, well history is so important, in terms of figuring out, where we go, what to do now. I agree with you, it's as if we're at a standstill.*

**Renee:** Media literacy has become over-simplified. It's over simplified. I guess that's how I feel. Sometimes I think it's because I've been through the mill a few times and heard the ideas before. Or is it because it really just isn't growing? And I think that's really the question. It starts with the blame on the outside if it's just me. It just doesn't grab me the way it did. Maybe there will be something new. I know that if I write about this, even in an article, you're stimulating me, and maybe the transcript or something to be the basis.

It's like how can we link to the others thinking about these issues and the media? And I have to say that some of the people from the industry are doing some of the most mind boggling thinking. Yes, what I was going to tell you about the grant, I knew I had left something out.

The keyword is called trans media. There is a thinker named Jeff Gomez, who is not mentioned in any media literacy circles, but Jeff is having a huge influence on the industry. It's about mythic thinking with media. It's for branding but when I heard him speak, and he's one of the most sophisticated theorists that I have heard in a long long time. And he's having a very large influence on the next developments of media. It's called transmedia or thinking. Henry Jenkins has articulated this vision and Jeff Gomez is one of the entrepreneurs putting it into action.

He is the CEO of a company called Starlight Runner. It's very different than what we're talking about. It appeals to me, as a teacher of English, because of the narrative scope of what he's trying to do.

It's basically, for example, media literacy could connect to narrative theory. If you look at, I mean I've been working with doctoral students as a faculty member at institutions such as Teachers College, Columbia University. If you look at some of the most interesting work theoretically, in English Education, it's narrative inquiry. Story and meaning. The humanness of story. We're not tapping into any of that in media literacy. The way we tell stories, that's what's compelling to do.

We all know from media literacy that each genre tells a story in a different way, right? Something in film is different than a television story, or one in print or a game. So, we've got a multitude of genres. But we haven't looked very much at how these genres interconnect with each other and build a much larger story. Now, when you've got a franchise - Let's say George Lucas, who is interesting, because he tries to do educational stuff as well, with Edutopia. But you know, when you're building a Star Wars brand, quote, unquote, you are looking at how the toy impacts the game, how the game impacts the whatever, the movie, and how the, you know. All of these are story elements.

If you look to Gomez's work, you would see that he calls this integration mythical. He's talking about, how do some stories become larger than life? They enter into our very being, our very culture, and why do they? So, I think this media literacy, we've been so narrowly focused, that we don't understand why certain story elements are so powerful and profound and why people want to use them.

For example, there is a current case before the Supreme Court on video games. Big case, it's just came up before the Supreme Court. About violence and video games, and is there any redeeming social value. It's like pornography years ago. I think we have to understand, violence which is of course very abhorrent, at the same time, seems to have a deep psychic connection. My husband is a psychoanalyst, and we go to a variety of psychoanalytic conferences. Psychoanalysis has always been very interested in film and the kinds of stories that we tell ourselves—both our personal stories and the cultural stories that we buy into. So, I think that media are representative of those stories, and sometimes very exploitative of those stories.

I know because I work with people who write scripts. I'm an educational consultant on a couple of different programs for children. They go through five iterations with about 20 people giving them notes on the script. Even for the most simple of children's shows. I see how these are built, and in my job as an education consultant, I look at this and I think, you know, there's a teachable moment here. How about if we do this or say this, or you know?

We're working with a culture. Media are huge communities of culture. When I do my work here in New York, there are animators reading my stuff in Toronto, there are writers in LA, and so is the company with its standards and practices division, for example. You just have to respect that media production is a huge, huge enterprise, that we need to better understand and learn from, as well as criticize.

***DM: Is there anything else you want to add?***

No, I think the most important question might be, where is media literacy going? It is wonderful to know that there is a new generation coming up with new ideas that will invigorate media literacy and media studies. For those of us who are still alive and kicking and who can recount these histories while still looking to the future, there is a lot more to say and do. But it needs to come from some deeper spring. Perhaps this new work that you are doing with Tessa (Jolls) will be a source of that spring, to energize us. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.