

DOUGLAS KELLNER

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INTERVIEWED BY: DEE MORGENTHALER

(QUOTE)

If you look at Britain, Australia, and Canada, the three other biggest English speaking countries, all of them have some quite sophisticated media education programs in the schools K-12, whereas it's an exception in the U.S.

BIOGRAPHY OF DOUG KELLNER

Douglas Kellner is an author, theorist, and George Kneller Chair of the Philosophy of Education at UCLA. He was an early theorist in the field of media literacy, who has since published on topics including the philosophy of Herbert Marcuse, cinema and politics, communications, and media and cultural studies.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

What inspired your journey in terms of getting to the point of looking at media and media education? I'm really interested in who inspired your work in terms of texts and technology and social events.

When you were doing those workshops, when you were asked to go around and speak, were those to teachers, teacher groups?

Where did your involvement in media education go from there?

Do you feel like the direction that we're going in now, maybe since then, is in a good direction?

Do you have suggestions for the field?

I'm very aware of that issue, that we are very far behind in terms of media education, and it's so strange to me that we're in this society where it seems to be maybe even more influential than in the other areas where they have a much more developed literacy system. What do you think the reason behind that is? Why haven't we caught onto that? Do you think it's politics?

One of the things you touched on in your philosophical adventure piece is that, while we still need to have critical media skills and visual media skills, there's still a need for print literacy also. Can you elaborate?

Who should be leading the effort?

(Interview Begins)

DM: *What inspired your journey in terms of getting to the point of looking at media and media education? I'm really interested in who inspired your work in terms of texts and technology and social events.*

DK: I began getting involved in media studies and education in the 1970s, around 1973, when I got a job as an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Texas. This was before there was a field of media education, or at least I didn't know about it. After teaching there a couple years a group of graduate students and myself had a study group. Basically, we were trying to figure out how the revolution in the 1960s failed, what was the major sort of conservative cultural force that kept U.S. society together, as it were, and what was the major socializer, form of ideology, and political influence, etc.

We concluded it was media, and especially television. So I actually started studying media in the 1970s in a study group with graduate students. Then around 1977, I started to teach a course called Philosophy of Culture and Communication. This was still before I'd heard of media education or cultural studies. So I just invented this course on my own, coming out of a study group with some graduate students.

And about the same time -- this was during the Carter years -- in the state of Texas, which at that time had its own Democratic governor -- it was pretty liberal at this time-- they got a grant from the federal government on this topic of media education.

I was basically hired to go around the state of Texas to do workshops on media education, along with a woman, a Latino guy, and a black guy. We were basically covering the representation of values and ideologies in media and, in general, the politics of representation concerning gender, race, class, sexuality and so on.

Hence, we had a woman that taught reading images of women on TV; and a Latino and a black guy who engaged representations of people of color, so that we were actually doing what later became the politics of representation and cultural studies, which engages representations and images of different group in the media, and then critiques sexism, racism, homophobia, and other negative stereotyped representations of specific social groups. In this Texas project, I started to do media education in a very classical way, teaching high school teachers how to read the media and how to teach media education in the classroom, and around the same time was trying to do this in my own course.

So I got into media education in a very practical and in a very political way, before there was an academic field, or I started writing on it, or discovered even British Cultural Studies.

Sometime, I think in the 1980s, I discovered that Stuart Hall and the Birmingham group were doing the same kind of media studies in this new discipline called cultural studies. Then I became part of that, connecting media education to cultural studies.

DM: When you were doing those workshops, when you were asked to go around and speak, were those to teachers, teacher groups?

DK: Yes. Very specifically it was called the Mississippi Delta Project, which was a liberal government project from the Carter administration in the late 1970s. There was poverty and bad schools in that area, and a sense that they should teach media literacy and media education to give them something they weren't getting in those schools. I was teaching teachers how to teach media education in the project, and unfortunately as soon as the Reagan administration came in, they dropped the funding of that program. So I don't know what happened to it, politically.

But it was a good program for me to interact with teachers to get a very practical orientation towards teaching media education. That is, how do I do it in a classroom as a college instructor, and then hope that future high school teachers, or maybe even grade school teachers, will teach media literacy.

DM: Where did your involvement in media education go from there?

DK: Well, I started just writing articles and books on television, on film, on media literacy. All of this accelerated tremendously when, in 1997, I got hired by UCLA to teach philosophy of education. One of the courses I did was Cultural Studies in Media Literacy. So about 1997, this became the focus of my work, whereas previously I was in a philosophy department and it was just one thing I was teaching among many things.

DM: Do you feel like the direction that we're going in now, maybe since then, is in a good direction?

DK: No. Unfortunately, media education and literacy just are not on the agenda for reforming education today, although certainly they should be.

DM: Do you have suggestions for the field?

DK: Yes. I think that education in the United States has been severely compromised and limited by not bringing media education into the curriculum. This would involve starting with K-12 and teaching media literacy as one teaches book literacy. While we're getting computer literacy teaching in the schools, somehow media literacy just never took off in American schools. This has been just a big problem, and a scandal, really. If you look at Britain, Australia, and Canada, the three other biggest English speaking countries, all of them have some quite sophisticated media education programs in the schools K-12, whereas it's an exception in the U.S.

DM: I'm very aware of that issue, that we are very far behind in terms of media education, and it's so strange to me that we're in this society where it seems to be maybe even more influential than in the other areas where they have a much more developed literacy system. What do you think the reason behind that is? Why haven't we caught onto that? Do you think it's politics?

DK: I think it's politics and ingrained bureaucracy and conservatism in the schools. It's politics because no administration has ever brought this into the Department of Education curriculum, except for that very tiny moment in the Carter administration. I'm not even sure who it was that did this, obviously somebody in the Carter administration was farseeing enough to recognize that media education was important, and got some money to begin programs, but it just never developed.

As soon as you get to conservative administrations, like the Reagan, Bush One and Bush Two administrations, they are just into the most conservative teaching for testing. Rudimentary reading skills and math skills are what are emphasized, so there'll be hopefully improved test scores.

DM: *One of the things you touched on in your philosophical adventure piece is that, while we still need to have critical media skills and visual media skills, there's still a need for print literacy also. Can you elaborate?*

DK: Absolutely. We need enhanced print literacies with computer literacy that requires even more reading and writing skills. I use the term "multiple literacies," because more than ever before, with the Internet, we have to read and write in an intelligible and coherent way and be literate in many dimensions of our life.

DM: *There was this really brief moment, in terms of 21st century learning skills, where it seemed like we were heading in a direction where the U.S. education system was finally recognizing this need, but it's kind of gotten lost in the politics of education. In terms of a policy level, one of the questions that keeps coming up in my policy classes is local control versus national control standards. If you have a little more local control over your curriculum and such, it might filter down more cleanly to the students. Now they're studying these national standards on media literacy.*

DK: Right. Well, the scandal is that neither on the federal, state, or local level has anyone really taken up media literacy as an important educational reform. There may be some exceptions, but there aren't many media literacy programs. There are a couple in the L.A. area that my student Jeff Share has been involved in. Here and there you'll see some, but few, if any, have taken this up in the U.S. as an important project. So that's why it's a scandal, really.

DM: *Who should be leading the effort?*

DK: Everybody.

DM: *In terms of our discipline or our field, I'd read that the view is that we're fragmented, and we're calling it different things, and we're not talking to the right people in order to get it. Everyone has the same goal, we want it to be in the education system, but for some reason...*

DK: Well there's not enough "we's" on this. I think that education programs are also a scandal. It's a scandal that schools of education aren't pursuing media literacy more aggressively. Now, it's an exception at UCLA, partly because I'm teaching there, Ernest Morrell, who's been doing media literacy for years, Rhonda Hammer, Jeff Share, and others are teaching media literacy. We really have a lot of people who just came here on their own, not through us having a program. It's just individuals who happened to have media education and literacy as an agenda and have been doing it here at UCLA.

Yet we still don't even have a media literacy program at UCLA. We've had a couple of attempts to get something started. We also have a group of people in the Information Studies side of the School of Education, like Leah Lievrouw who are into media literacy, new media, and such things.

But we did sort of an informal survey, how many schools of education teach cultural studies and media education? And they were few and far between.

DM: *When did you do that?*

DK: Just a couple of years ago. I mean, this wasn't a systematic attempt to develop a media literacy program, just a group of us thinking that it should be done. Do you know of any systematic studies of people who have implemented media literacy programs?

DM: *In terms of an overall review of who's teaching media literacy, I haven't seen any, no.*

DK: I just think it'll be dispiriting when one finds out there's hardly any of these projects going on.

DM: *I know. I've got my masters degree in Communication and Media Literacy. I have young children, and my interest in it was peaked from my children. I wanted to get my PhD in it. But logistically I can't move. So I forced my way into the School of Education, and they really still don't know what to do with me or where to put me. So I kind of bounced around between cultural and informational studies and things like that. I think that's just very demonstrative of how there isn't really any sustained projects of media education on the agenda of education in the U.S. today at all. People in the field of education really don't understand the term.*

DK: Right. So it's really a scandal. To return to your very first question, what is the status of the field of media education at the present, I would say it's just scandalously underdeveloped in the U.S. Whereas in Canada, they have some impressive programs on different local and regional areas. In Australia, the UK, you'll get a somewhat developed field of media education. And here it's just underdeveloped. It's basically individuals are doing this here and there, and groups are doing this here and there, like the Santa Monica group.

DM: Right.

DK: But there really isn't a field in the domain of higher education or K-12 education. By the way, they're starting to do this now in China, in Taiwan, and other places in Asia, having media literacy in the school. So the West is behind almost everyone.

DM: *I know, and as an infant in the academic world, I'm always trying to struggle where to put my energy. I keep coming back to the fact that it needs to go to the policy level. That is such a huge undertaking. It's very, very disheartening.*

DK: Well, my response to that is, yes, it's extremely important to get some policy intervention going on. But you can do it in your own classroom. So I have a lot of students who now have jobs in education programs, and they're teaching cultural studies and media literacy as part of different courses they're teaching. Sometimes it is put in foundation of education courses, sometimes literacy ones, sometimes this that or the other course where they sneak it in. So that's the other level where we can do things. I don't want to be completely negative and pessimistic that there's nothing we can do. I mean, there's more than enough to do. We can do it in our own classes. We can fit it in one way or the other and fight to get courses in our programs.

DM: *Right. In the K-12 level one way in, I see, is at the local level; creating a pilot program and trying to make changes at my local level. That's the direction I'm leaning towards, just baby steps.*

DK: Right.

DM: *How about interesting new areas of research that you see emerging in terms of new media? Any comments there in terms of things we need to explore further, things that are piquing your interest?*

DK: Right. Actually new media is a much more exciting and encouraging field in American academia than media literacy. In other words, there are really a lot of people that are studying the Internet and are studying everything from Twitter to blogs to how we can do courses online to what kind of online components we can bring into our classes. So there's really a lot that's being done in that area. What's being given short shrift in all this is old fashioned media literacy, teaching people how to read the media, like television, film, popular music and so on. By the way, let me put one important point on my view of media literacy. That is Rhonda Hammer, Jeff Share, others that I'm associated with do what we call "critical media literacy."

In other words, it's not enough just to be able to read the media, but you have to be able to critique it in terms of the politics of representation. What are the biases in terms of representation for women, people of color, gays and lesbians, different social group? Muslims, for instance are now a demonized group in the media.

We look critically at the representations of media, but we also look at issues of power, who controls the power of representation. It's basically just a few media corporations: the big television networks, film companies, music conglomerates, advertising agencies and the like.

Now when you turn to new media, it becomes a very different story in terms of power, that anyone can do it. So that's one of the encouraging things that anyone can make a YouTube. Anyone can Twitter. Anyone can set up a blog.

DM: I know, it's a major shift.

DK: So that's really quite an astounding dichotomy here where we have old media, media literacy, a top-down model that's been ignored in the schools, and then we have new media is like bottom-up. It's something that's been engaged in the schools. It's a booming field in every way, from production to academic studies.

DM: I read a statistic about how much teens are creating media.

DK: Right, yes. So that's really encouraging. Whereas the other is really discouraging. [laughs] So it's sort of a schizophrenic field in that sense.

DM: I feel that. [laughs] That's great. OK. I always find it astounding in terms of educating educators because it's not on their radar, and they don't understand the power structures. You take for granted people assume that they are media literate. But when you tell them the actual facts about who is controlling their news channels and such, there's this look of complete shock.

DK: I mean, that's part of literacy, seeing Fox News is just straight up right-wing propaganda. That CNN tries to be middle of the road, but some of the different people have their biases. MSNBC now is being straight up left-wing with Keith Olbermann, Rachel Maddow, Ed Schultz, and others. So you have to see what the biases are of the different television shows, and even networks. To be news media literate, you need to know how to read these networks. And this is, I think, another thing that's been neglected, things like news information journalism. Media education tends to focus on entertainment: images of women, blacks, gays, whoever, and neglects teaching reading news and information critically.

DM: Or being able to identify what is a message. Sometimes I think when I talk to teens about media and have them try to identify, they don't really even understand that they're seeing a message, that there's an agenda there.

DK: Exactly. So that's why you need sort of basic literacy of how to read, to see messages, to see narratives, to see biases, and things like that. But there really isn't even a field; it's so undeveloped. There are just individuals trying to do this, that, and the other

thing. But there are some individuals, like the people you're interviewing, who have done a lot in their personal teaching and their writing trying to do this, that, and the other thing. So it's not that there's been a complete lack of effort, or there's no one out there doing it. There are. Quite a few people. But just on the policy level and on the program level...

DM: Right, the effects of all this work is hard to see. The outcomes. The outcomes are hard to grasp.

DK: But I'll bet if you talk to people from China and Australia, you're going to get a quite different narrative. In this regard, the U.S. is underdeveloped and backward, as it were. Whereas you wouldn't say this about computer education. The U.S. is right up there. There are plenty of schools, even poor schools, that give every student a computer because they got a grant, or teach computer literacy in education.