

KATHRYN CURRIER (KATE) MOODY  
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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

*My expectation was that once parents and educators had certain kinds of information about the available research and the probable effects of habitual TV viewing that they would do something about them. And I must say that all the problems are still there and I don't see that anything much has been solved since my book, "Growing Up on Television," was published in 1980.*

#### BIOGRAPHY OF KATHRYN CURRIER (KATE) MOODY

**Kate Moody** is a lifelong educator and author who currently serves on the Alumni Advisory Council of Teachers College Columbia University (where she earned a doctoral degree in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education) and is in a private practice as a psychoeducational therapist. For the last several years she has been researching and writing a book about educational systems in Cuba (with a travel license from the U.S. Government). She has worked for public school systems, Sesame Street, Nickelodeon and PBS. She was editor of Television Awareness Training (Media Action Research Center 1979) and author of *Growing Up on Television* (Times Books, 1980). In 1994-2001 she developed and headed the OPEN GATES Advanced Teaching and Telecommunications Center at the University of Texas Medical School and served on the faculty in the Department of Neurology. She began her career as a third grade teacher and reading specialist in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

#### INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

*Why did you become involved in media education?*

*But there certainly had to be a context and an environment where the conditions that built up, that this is what emerged and so I think your description of that watershed year is important to the story. What informed and inspired your work?*

*Are there any other milestones that come to mind as you think about how your own interest, learning and contributions to the field evolved?*

*So, you're talking about medical issues that really come down to neurology right?*

*How do you see things developing and where you see those kinds of experiences going?*

*We know the media is a big part of everyone's life, there is a lifelong relationship with it. It's not going to change, it's undoubtedly affecting the brain and processing and the way young people really deal with media and so, in that sense, we're almost at a given and that it will continue to be there.*

*What would you like to see happen?*

*In your work you see some of the negative outcomes because of the patients and clients that you're dealing with and in a sense those manifestations of the effects are really important to look at. Do these outcomes warrant serious consideration and examination?*

(Interview Begins)

***TJ: Why did you become involved in media education?***

**KM:** My father was a journalist. I think that had something to do with my general interest in how people communicate. More specifically, I became interested in the 1960s in media education, meaning media broadly defined to include electronic media and all the arts. I have been a reading teacher all of my adult life. When I moved to New York from Michigan in the late 60s, it was a very interesting time. First of all, I fell into an opportunity where I began working in a television studio in an elementary school and it happens, and I verified this, it happens that the production studio at the Murray Avenue School in Larchmont, N.Y. was indeed the first television production studio in a school in the United States, and I presume therefore, anywhere. This was a full 3-camera studio with control room, editing equipment, etc. But I became interested in that, not because I was interested in television in particular, but because I had to finish a master's thesis at the University of Michigan. I had just moved here (to New York) and I really didn't have a laboratory. My contacts were in another state. I saw this as an opportunity to use this television studio as a laboratory to observe children learning in a very pioneering way. I reported on this experience extensively in my book The Children of Telstar.

I subsequently wrote a master's thesis about what can be learned by working with children in a new medium, that is to say, newer than print. We were working with cameras as "process tools," i.e. to write and tell stories (late 1960s) And I found that experience to be transformative for me because I stayed interested in television as an object of inquiry--as something to study in the future--and in the course of doing that I interviewed many interesting people for the Master's Thesis (c. 1970). I met people who worked in major foundations here, I became involved with *Sesame Street* and at the same time, I must point out that 1968 was one of the most interesting years of the century for a convergence of influences regarding media. Not only was that the year that I was writing this paper and working in this studio, but I also had children who were toddlers and preschoolers at the very time that *Sesame Street* went on the air. I remember watching, with my four year-old and infant, the very first program and it was a moment you just had to think about all these things that were happening. It was a new day for children's television certainly; *Sesame Street* was a revolutionary program. Additionally, the Action for Children's Television (ACT) was founded that same year, an event which has never been paid much attention by the media literacy people. They seem to start after 1968 and discount the importance of that group,

which was indeed functioning as a critic as well as a catalyst for future developments. I would point any reader who wants a broad history of media evolution to explore the history of Action for Children's Television which was founded by Peggy Charren in 1968. The complete archive is at Harvard University's Gutmann Library. I became the founder and president of the ACT affiliate in New York, called New York Council on Children's Television. The Ethical Culture Society gave us office space for a year or so and a small grant to get started. ACT became one of the largest advocacy programs for children at any time. There were hundreds of thousands of members nationwide and the group did such things as petition FTC and the FCC regarding standards in advertising, and even at one point sued the FCC for not following through on standards they had promised. I thought then, and I think now, that parents need a little help. Teachers need a little help, by structuring our mass media in a better way.

Media has been systematically deregulated throughout my adult life. There were complaints that we had at the time about violence and advertising in particular—that isn't violence IN advertising, but violence AND advertising -- but they're so related. Anyway it's become only worse in terms of the big picture, which means that the media literacy workers have to huff and puff and work harder. But these were the origins . . . and at the same time 1968 was the great watershed year for the whole topic for media and kids.

The Surgeon General's report on violence or aggressive behavior was funded at the national level and that was an extensive report and it was finally published in 1972. So you had the Action for Children's Television, Sesame Street, and at a national level studies on aggressive behavior taking place. About that time, I met John Calkin who had recently left the priesthood and started The Center for Understanding Media in New York. I became involved with *Sesame Street* and with some foundations, and with some writing projects for the Center. It was a few years after that that I started working with Les Brown, the television correspondent to the New York Times. He asked me to write sections of the book, The New York Times Encyclopedia of Television (Times Books 1977). From that experience, I was learning from senior people and working on a topic that had become of great interest. I was transformed for awhile from a reading teacher's focus, particularly on print literacy, to a person studying media, broadly defined, in terms of what were at the time new electronic media forms. In the late 70s I was the editor of Television Awareness Training which was a manual for teachers who wanted to become media educators. The construction of that manual with workshops and exercises was also a precursor to what you would call the media literacy movement which really didn't dawn until the late 70s although Liz Thoman was hard at work in Iowa.

***TJ: But there certainly had to be a context and an environment where the conditions that built up, that this is what emerged and so I think your description of that watershed year is important to the story. What informed and inspired your work?***

KM: Although 1968 was a watershed year in terms of actions, names and dates, there was much before that. I was certainly reading Marshall McLuhan when his landmark book, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man was published in 1964. I still have my original copy of that text with all sorts of handwritten notes scribbled in the margins and much color coding of content. For me that was a very important book. I found later on that a lot of people that I would meet

five, six, eight years hence were also reading it. So McLuhan is part of this story. And John Culkin was very much his protégé and very good friend. The introduction to the McLuhan-Culkin way of thinking, not that it's one way of thinking, but certainly an influence was present prior to 1968.

Another important person in my early studies was Norman Cousins. He was a major philosopher, writer, and publisher of *The Saturday Review* weekly magazine. He was somebody that I was reading back when I was reading McLuhan. Later I met him and he became a good friend, in fact he wrote the introduction to Growing Up on Television. He was important because he really encouraged me to do further studies of television. He thought that this was enormously important, and it helps when the people you admire tell you that. Another person going way back was Prof. Gerald O'Grady. He was/is a philosopher and he was a consultant to our local schools when our local school district was doing far more with media than any place had ever heard of. They hired O'Grady as a consultant to our school district and in one of the planning memos or proposals he put forward his own definition of media studies. I think it's very good. I certainly would take it for my own.

He wrote, "I would like to delimit media studies to mean exploration and creation, the aesthetics and the psychological, social and environmental impact of the art form of photography, cinematography, videography, radio recordings and tapes within the broad framework of general education in the humanities. I would call media studies 'the new humanities' to distinguish them from 'the old humanities'-- literature, drama, fine arts, etc. -- from which they often borrow and with which they continually interact, mutually influencing each other." That's the broadest view of the subject that I recall.

Others who inspired my work across the years include: Cy Schneider at NICKELODEON, Bob Geller, Dr. Calvert E. Schlick, and Kit Laybourne in the Mamaroneck Public Schools, Teri McLuhan, Thomas N. James, M.D., Albert Rosenfeld, Peggy Charren, and Chester M. Pierce, M.D.

***TJ: I think that would be very pertinent to today's media. You could extend that list that O'Grady had.***

**KM:** He didn't include things like cable TV, because it was not available in 1975. He was a big thinker, he certainly influenced what was going on in our school district and, believe me, our school district was the most imaginative that I have ever heard of. But there was sort of a golden age, and that's why I wrote a book, *Children of Telstar* (Center for Understanding Media). The original manuscript for that book was my doctoral dissertation at Columbia University (1993).

***TJ: Are there any other milestones that come to mind as you think about how your own interests, learning and contributions to the field evolved?***

**KM:** As I already noted earlier, the paper that I wrote on instructional television was my master's thesis at Michigan. There was also the involvement I had at Murray Avenue School, where I was the developer of the project that was of historic importance. There were affiliates developed to ACT and I was the founder and president of New York Children's Television

which was the one of the affiliates which brought me to a lot of advocacy. Then I was the editor of Television Awareness Training, followed by my numerous contributions to the New York Times Encyclopedia of Television and probably the work that I am most proud of, is my book Growing Up on Television which was published in 1980. That was a continuation of my studies with Les Brown and New York Times Encyclopedia of Television, but I wanted to focus just on children in that book. And though the book is quite old now, in a way it's very contemporary because all of the issues I stated there are still issues today. Sorry to say that that's true, and if there is an expectation that I had, it was that once parents and educators had certain kinds of information about the available research and the probable effects of habitual TV viewing, that they would do something about them. And I must say that all the problems are still there and I don't see that anything much has been done about them.

If you look at Growing Up on Television, the key issues in the table of contents go through the chapters on the effects on aggressive behavior, socialization, there's a chapter called learning and perception, another one about reading, another one about commercialization and products, considerable discussion of pace of messages, nutrition and obesity -- whatever the topics that you deal with in media literacy studies, they were named and dealt with there as concerns. And I was more of a critic than anything in that book and I saw this all coming. These were all problems. Remember, I had little kids at the time, and I was concerned about them as an educator and reading teacher. Anyway, I gathered together the existing research at the time.

The internet and other screens are all first, second and third cousins of television. In the 1970s, everybody was running around gleefully saying "cable is coming," this is going to be so wonderful because now we will have alternatives to commercial broadcast TV and apparently people thought that all these alternatives would be good. Well, they're not. In 1981, 1982 I was director of corporate development at Nickelodeon. NICK has disappointed me in the sense that at the time in 1981, 1982 we were so delighted that this was "the first and only non-commercial channel for kids" and we kept saying that phrase over again every time because we were proud of it. But nothing stays non-commercial for very long. And I left when it all switched to an ad supported format. I wasn't going to participate in the commodification of kids via advertising. But I was there when Nickelodeon was very small; there were only four or five of us on staff. I was there when NICK was launched on the satellite in 1982 and we thought that this was real progress because the programming was definitely designed for children and young people. There were no commercials, maybe as time went on there was an underwriting message here and there but we had strict rules as to what constituted an underwriting message and what it could not do. "No claims, no demonstrations," was the rule because then it would become an advertisement. I went on to teach about this at Hunter College and I was a consultant to the local school district when I had the idea that I would like to teach at the university level which required a doctorate. So I did go back to school in 1988 to Columbia University where I entered a doctoral program to have the credentials to teach in the university about media.

I earned the degree and immediately went off to work with Neil Postman at NYU. He invited me to NYU to be co-director with him on something called the Institute on Media and Education. In 1994, we had a major conference in which Liz Thoman was one of the invited speakers. Then one day while I was minding my own business and doing this work at NYU, I got a phone call from somebody who was very involved with the University of Texas Medical School. This

person, Al Rosenfeld, has been a good friend of mine, a scientist, and a science writer doing work there for the president. He said to me, "I really want you to meet Dr. Thomas James, the president of the medical school." So my husband and I accepted an invitation to spend a long weekend so I could hear what Dr. James was aiming to develop at the University of Texas. And although Dr. James was a cardiologist, he read widely and he was very interested in telecommunications. He had a specific interest in reading and why some people learn to read easily and why other people, despite having all the best teachers, don't read well at all (dyslexia). Anyway, his concept was that we want to study the old media, that is print, and the new media, and ask questions about this in research terms. (His thinking about the definition of media studies was over-arching, like Gerald O'Grady, described above.) The president saw that I had been a reading teacher all my life and continued to study dysfunctions in communication while pursuing projects and studies in television as well. Of course once I heard about this, it was compellingly interesting.

So in the fall of 1994, I became the executive director of the OPEN GATES Advanced Teaching and Telecommunications Center at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, reporting to the president at the medical school with all kinds of opportunities before me. And so that was a milestone too, in terms of where I am now. We had television studios there with the capacity of satellite connections to anywhere in the world. We did medical training with and for NASA. (NASA headquarters is just down the road.) It seemed like we could do anything. We developed a system of telemedicine clinics in the prisons throughout Texas because the distances are so great. We were experimenting with all kinds of distance learning, modes in the nursing schools, telemedicine clinics there based from the campus. And at the same time, we had a very major treatment center for dyslexia which specialized in the treatment of dyslexia in medical students. Along with somebody else who was in Dallas, Dr. Lucius Waites, the neurologist, our group plus other people were always collaborating on things and we became the designers of the draft of a Master of Science degree for dyslexia therapy at a medical school. Such a degree did not exist at the time.

***TJ: So you're talking about medical issues, issues that really come down to neurology right?***

**KM:** I had an appointment in the Department of Neurology which is probably the most appropriate academic home for such work. But, of course, as with all my work, there was an extensive interdisciplinary reach.

***TJ: You were really breaking down the silos too, in terms of being able to do cross disciplinary kinds of projects, which I think is all part of media literacy.***

**KM:** The bureaucracy prevents many things, but it can also provide a complexity in the environment that allows for diverse connections. So I had the great opportunity here to work for a president who was as far advanced as anybody in that kind of thinking. He was the big out of the box thinker.

***TJ: How do you see things developing?***

**KM:** I am reluctant to predict. One of your questions is how far do you think the field has come, and of course the answer is not far enough. If we said we're done, we're finished.

***TJ: We'd be taken for granted.***

**KM:** And forgotten. You can't do that. So, as the field has a long way to go and I really question most of the time whether all the media literacies in the world can really counterbalance the effects of new media. There's considerable dissonance now. Because to some extent, only to some extent, Marshall McLuhan was right, and the medium is the message. When you have a medium that's jumping and changing its picture every quarter of a second, it's going to affect the brain. And I don't care whether you're talking about the weather report, or the latest war, or selling sugar products to kids. The nature of the media requires the brain to be working all the time.

There are going to be negative effects and you can talk all day about what they are and how you might need to do some yoga or you might need to understand the motive of the producer, but it's still going to have those effects. I don't think you can ameliorate some of these effects of the new media: too much data per unit—for most brains. So we can try but informing parents about certain things isn't enough. They can be just as informed as you want them to be and they'll still do certain things. The people who weren't even born yet when I wrote that book are parents now. And some of their kids are already adolescents; they were raised on television themselves. It doesn't matter if they have media literacy information or not. The media have penetrated their lives in a way that was hardly imaginable 25 years ago when you think of the studies with which you're familiar about who watches what, for how much time per day, and how many text messages, or how many this, how many that, what portion of your life is given over to this. You can't change the fact that that's a quarter of your life.

***TJ: We know the media is a big part of everyone's life, there is a lifelong relationship with it. It's not going to change, it's undoubtedly affecting the brain and processing and the way young people really deal with media and so in that sense we're almost at a given and that it will continue to be there.***

**KM:** I don't think it needs to be a given that kids will have 1000 text messages in a day. It doesn't have to be a given unless you roll over and accept it right there.

***TJ: What would you like to see happen?***

**KM:** I would like to see one thing, the simplest one. What I would like to see is a balancing of the senses. To do that, I would recommend far less involvement with electronic media per day. And so I know certain people that don't like to hear this. But the only way to bring it down to size so that you could then work with it is to give it a proportion that is less than it currently is. I do maintain a private practice here now in which I see students that have fairly serious learning disabilities. I could tell you for sure that media is a huge interference for someone who has great difficulty with the reading and writing aspects of attending high school and passing the required

tests. To remediate those things (this is a direct extension of my work in Texas), I know that they need more time and they know that they need specific kinds of lessons and work and you can't find time in their day to do this. They're too busy racing from one thing to the next. Media is a total interference; it is a daily static interference to concentration and the ability to pay attention well.

So trimming down the size of participation in media, in one's personal life is something to be addressed at home. Parents are quite crazy about this because when they see addictions developing most can't interfere successfully with habit formation. At the public level too, I believe in setting standards, I believe in regulation. I prefer to call it standards. I would make rules about pace and content in children's fare, and ask parents to limit the quantity of time allotted to viewing of "screens" per day.

There's still plenty for the media educators to do after that, because there are many topics of analysis and/or production to consider in school. In a slightly different vein, I would like to see music addressed as an object of inquiry to a greater extent that it has been. John Culkin and I discussed this at great length near the end of his life. We need to know more about how music works, both in the brain and in social behaviors. He felt it was a mistake to not have included this in the curricula we developed in the schools where we worked.

In the last five years or so, I've become very interested in Oliver Sacks, the brilliant neurologist, and storyteller. He has written books on music and the brain. You can study music from a medical perspective but also from a social perspective, looking at what kids sing, what kids groove into their heads at an early age. Yes, the message matters.

***TJ: There is a receptivity there that may not be in other kinds of media.***

**KM:** That's right. Music is playing in their brains and developing a little groove there. I'm currently studying Cuba and education systems in Cuba. Music and all the arts hold a special place there.

***TJ: In your work, you see some of the negative outcomes because of the patients and clients that you're dealing with. Does that warrant serious consideration and examination?***

**KM:** Yes... but you have to understand my perspective here, having heavy involvement with dyslexia and ADHD both at the medical school and in my work now. There's a lot of hyperkinesis, hyperactivity around in behaviors and sometimes the behaviors are barriers to doing your schoolwork in an acceptable way, and to just getting along with others. One of the things I always do with a new client is a rather elaborate survey of how he or she uses time. It takes a whole hour to do this kind of survey. But they don't understand how media and texts infiltrate their lives. The first step is awareness.

***TJ: Do you feel that teaching young people how media works as a system, teaching them the critical thinking skills, teaching them about responsible***

*productions -- how far do you think that goes in terms of addressing what we are up against here?*

**KM:** I think it's helpful, but I'm not sure how helpful. I think to the extent that it involves "doing," it's more effective. One of the outcomes of our work in the Larchmont/Mamaroneck Public Schools with the Center for Understanding Media was the production of a paperback manual called, Doing the Media: a Portfolio of Activities. It explained how to carry out production projects with many kinds of media—hands on activities. But just talking to people about these kinds of things, even if it's in brilliantly thought-out lessons. . . I don't think it helps very much. I have a story that I think I wrote about when my son was a teenager. I went out to Albuquerque once for a media literacy conference, and I was telling him about what my presentation was going to be and what it was all about. He said, "Mom, I could be in one of those classes and hear about all the critical thinking points; I can do all of your exercises really well. But then I would just go home and watch television the same way after that."

I think you have to **do** the media. I don't think you can sit in the classroom and hear about it. That's it. But then it falls within, as O'Grady said, the humanities, but even more specifically the arts. And what do we cut in this country when things get rough? Music, visual arts and physical education. That's what is closest to the media education program, because then eventually hopefully with a little help, the creative teacher could tie some of those things together, but if you don't have the "doing part" of it, it isn't worth as much.

If you are a child, you have to make and create and do something or experience it with your body first and brain second—make a motor commitment.

It isn't good enough to have these media literacy programs and arts programs in selected public schools or charter schools or private schools. That just means some people get this education and some people don't. When I say public I mean public. As my mentor, Norman Cousins, often said, "Everybody's children are society's concern."