JAMES POTTER

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INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

If you read a book every two minutes and never slept for a year then you'd be able to get through almost all the books published in the United States this year. And that's just books; you wouldn't be able to watch TV, surf the Internet or text friends. We cannot possibly keep up with all media, so media literacy cannot be concerned with helping people keep up. Instead media literacy has to be more concerned with helping people use the media well to satisfy their own personal needs. We need to help people understand how to amplify the great many benefits of the media while avoiding the risks.

BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES POTTER

W. James Potter has been a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara since 2001. His research focuses primarily on media literacy and media violence, and he is the author of the class textbook, Media Literacy. He began his career as a journalist and is former editor of the Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media.

INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

What attracted you to media education?

What do you see as fitting the label "media literacy?"

How did the publication of your textbook, Media Literacy, come about?

What were some milestones that you've noted along the way, Jim, for yourself and for the field in general?

Were there surprises along the way that you hadn't anticipated?

There are people who say that media literacy is not a field, it's a movement, and other people say it's a movement, not a field. What is your take, Jim?

Do you feel that the media literacy field has been moving along in a direction that you think is beneficial?

What do you feel is your most important priority to be working on right now?

(Interview begins)

TJ: What attracted you to media education?

JP: Well that's a big question. I guess it goes back to the first job I had after I graduated. I worked at a small town newspaper and I worked on that for two years. What really made it an intense experience and what got me started on the path was that it was a small town newspaper. When you work at a small town newspaper, you're a photographer, you're a reporter, you're an editor, you do the layouts, you print out the pictures after you come back with the story -- so you really get your hands on all the aspects of news -- the police beat, the hospital beat, sports, everything. Then the other advantage of working for a small town newspaper was that you have a lot of contact with the people, so after you write the story you continually run into the people and so I had a lot of opportunity to ask people about the stories.

It started to fascinate me that some stories I wrote that I thought were really important, nobody would read. And then other stories that I thought were really trivial, people would talk about a lot. I became fascinated by what attracts people to stories and what it is that they learn when they read the stories, and so I was interested as much in writing the stories as in talking to the people afterwards.

That led me to graduate school because I thought, well maybe there's a better way to ask questions, maybe there are theories out there that could explain this. In my first graduate program, I was focused on writing, there was a lot of psychology, education and linguistics and things like that. After I got done with that program, I had learned a lot but then I thought, well I'm not interested only just in the general area of learning but learning in everyday experiences. So what fascinated me was a little bit less about what happens in formal situations where people learn; I was interested in that, but I think the learning that was most interesting is what happens in everyday life when people are not consciously trying to learn something with media, yet a lot of learning takes place.

That's the kind of stuff that takes place under the radar. And that became really, really fascinating so I thought ,well I'd rather learn more about the communication-in-the-media side, so I enrolled in a program to study that. In all that study, I didn't really run across the term media literacy much if at all, but I guess that's what I was really interested in -- what are the principles of learning on an everyday basis. Then, since I was planning on going on to teach in higher education, my question was how I could help people get better at that. So that, in a nutshell, is what attracted me and how I ended up in higher education.

TJ: What do you see as fitting the label "media literacy?"

JP: Even today, there's the label, media literacy, but one of the challenges now is that everybody has heard that term and they all have ideas about what that means. If you were to interview 100 different people, you'd probably get 150 different definitions about what it really means. So we're much better off than we were maybe 30 years ago, because we've reached a rallying point, but that could mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. But at least we have a common forum, and we're building more with organizations like yours which have done a tremendous amount, trying to bring people together and share outlooks and experiences. We really are still on the frontier; there's still so much more that has to be done.

TJ: What were some milestones that you've noted along the way, Jim, for yourself and for the field in general?

JP: The strength of media literacy is its variety, its broad based nature; it cuts across all kinds of different fields…it's such an organic and dynamic kind of field. Those are the characteristics that I see out there and the down side of that is there are so many creative people out there, really sincere and motivated people who are ready to help, local curriculum development committees or PTA or individual students or people in the industry, more educational shows, policy makers…there are all kinds of different people and they all talk different kinds of languages so for me, I just see almost a chaos out there that's an extreme slew of ideas that eventually is going to develop a lot of interesting insights as things move forth. But as far as traditionally what people mean by milestones, like a particular article or a particular conference that puts down a foundational pile-on that people build on, there are some that have attracted attention.

In 1998, Alan Rubin, who was editor of Journal of Communications at the time, asked a couple of us to do a symposium on media literacy. Bill Christ and I were able to get a really good handful of scholars who were active in that area. The individual articles in there have gotten a lot of quotes from it. Other efforts like those of Patricia Aufterheide and some other people, like Renee Hobbs, who is trying to build a professional organization. I commend those people who are trying to do that. It's so hard in this field where so much is changing so fast, there are so many competing journals and conferences out there, and with the economy the way it is, and so many demands on time. When you're interested in the media, there are really half a dozen conferences you should go to every year, and then to add another professional society, it's hard to find the time and money to go to all of those. So it's swimming upstream to pull people together.

TJ: How did the publication of your textbook, Media Literacy, come about?

JP: Every year, I taught an introductory media course. From the very beginning, I realized that you can't teach media effects without having people appreciate the media content, because it matters what you expose yourself to, and the content says something about the audience and what patterns there are and how people think. Then, to understand media, you have to know about the industry. So, in order to know one part or facet about the media, you have to know a little about a lot of different things. So that's how I started to teach. I was pulling the notes together, and I realized it was hard for me to find a textbook that did all of that -- not just present the information, but to present it in a way where the focus of presentation was on the student

rather than on the information itself. So I got a contract with Sage and published the text in the mid '90s. At the time, I thought this is for me, to make teaching much easier and maybe help some other people to find it much easier. I guess they did, because now I'm working on the 6th edition.

Media changes so much that you have to refresh the information and the examples in order to make the viable to each new generation of students. By generation, I mean every three or four years. The student perspective changes so fast. Like right now… what news really means is no longer Tom Brokaw…what the news really means to students is tweeting where their friends are having lunch. Well, that's news! "I thought we were going to have lunch at this place and now it's at another place." That's news to me, and that's news I can use, and that's really important to me, much more important than what the city council voted on or a murder that took place in the next county or things like that, which I was taught in journalism school. There's more and more of a disconnect between what people from the previous generation used as definitions and what definitions are in use with the new generation. The new generation's whole perspective on the world and what it means to be a part of a society and what it means to contribute to that -- all of that is very different than it was five years ago.

When I wrote the first edition of *Media Literacy*, desktop computers had been around for about 10-12 years and that was a major breakthrough. It seems like each two or three years the shift is happening in a more pervasive way and a more fundamental way…it seems like the turnovers happen faster and faster. It's hard to imagine though, what the next breakthrough will be in the next couple of years. Is there going to be another Facebook, Google, something that is totally going to revolutionize the next generation of students in where they get their information and the way they interpret the world?

TJ: Are there surprises along the way that you hadn't anticipated?

JP: Well, just about everything! Ten years ago Google, I think it was in the very beginning stage, it didn't exist as a company; it wasn't until 2004 that it was publically traded. Until then people didn't understand what the company was and what it was doing, but then when it went public, at least Wall Street understood this is a major change, this is a company that is really going to change the way we think about technology. And it definitely has. I saw some figures where it was the number one capitalized company in the world, where if you multiply their shares with how much people pay per share, its worth more than any other company in the world including Exxon Mobile and companies like that. The fact that it could grow that fast and become that important financially to people who really understand business, and then if you think the impact on the society and the way people check out friends, they will Google them. Find out who this person is, or date or a future employee. And financially and the impact on the economy is tremendous. As far as the impact on the culture, it's so big that our faces are pressed right up against it. We really don't have the distance or time to understand the ramifications that it has on the society. The thing with Facebook, the second example…I remember the time when MySpace was bigger and Rupert Murdoch came along and bought MySpace and now that's a dinosaur, nobody is on MySpace anymore, it's all Facebook.

People don't understand the legal ramifications of Facebook. Who owns that information, how that's shared, those people who get into trouble from posting things on their Facebook? And then

Twitter comes along. People spend a lot of time on Twitter and they really get something important out of that…and that is a brand new phenomenon too. So if you turn the clock back ten years, I would've never predicted, I don't think anybody could've predicted what 2011 would be as far as the degree of social connectedness, the virtual world that a lot of people live in, games that people play. A lot of people are members of virtual communities and that's much more important to them than the real world.

TJ: Do you feel that the media literacy field has been moving along in a direction that you think is beneficial?

JP: If you really think hard about it, it could drive you crazy. Because there are literally millions of people out there who are investing in these companies who are creating new websites, new apps who are dedicating large portions of their lives to creating messages and activities. Just think of Wikipedia -- people are not doing it for money but doing it for internal satisfaction. There is a huge attractiveness to the media and that's where the runaway development is coming because you just pull so many people, for so many hours, so many creative people.

Up against that you look at the challenge in media literacy. Media are just growing so fast and the number of people who are attracted to media literacy continues to grow, but not at the same rate as the amount of people who are attracted to media. So I guess there will come a time, maybe, when the new technologies and the new ways of developing information will plateau a little bit and slow down a bit. Maybe media literacy scholars and people who are socially active, maybe that will catch up. But right now, we have gone through such an explosion over the past decade especially of media outlets, of creating information and of the explosion of messages -- and not just the number of messages but the variety and types of messages by the means that you can create those messages -- that we as media literacy people really hadn't conceptualized before. I think we are really scrambling to keep up with that.

TJ: There are people who say that media literacy is not a field, it's a movement, and other people say it's a movement, not a field. What is your take, Jim?

JP: Well I've always thought that media literacy has the ingredients to be a field. I've always thought that it's important to have a rallying around a small set of theories, but right now in media we have over 100 theories. Yet only a handful of theories get mentioned more than a few times each year in the journals. So what we really have is a huge dispersion across a lot of disciplines, and that always bothered me.

Over the past few years, the phenomenon that we are studying is growing so fast and changing so much that I felt that we need to have more closure and conversion amongst scholars and more of a clustering of certain ideas in order to get the field a profile and a better definition. That could be a detriment to being seen as a field because if you're trying to be convergent and trying to build a field by trying to get everyone on the same page, with the same definitions – while the time goes by to do that, the field changes radically underneath you with the phenomenon that you're trying to study.

So for me, I've come to be a lot more comfortable with the organic nature and the fast change and the dynamic nature of the phenomenon itself. It's like riding a bucking bull. You want to

take a quick photograph of it to freeze it and understand it. That might satisfy your need for closure as a human being but it really doesn't capture the field because the field is a motion field, it's not a thing that could be captured in a snapshot.

When you're writing a book, that's what you have to do, you just have to get words down on a page. So my hope for the future is for the people who on the one hand, want to get things down on paper, who want to have convergence, who want to build a field, who want us to have a high profile but who also are comfortable with a phenomenon that will change radically. Once you get things written down on paper, you've captured it for a very short period of time, and then you've got to start all over again, and you just have to be comfortable with that.

TJ: Do you feel like the field has been moving in a positive direction?

JP: Yes, I do. It has attracted lots of different kinds of people. There are a lot of people out there who are making really good contributions and who are creating consumer protection groups, trying to influence policy, trying to put together conferences or holding mini sessions and trying to get people to come to that, putting up websites. There is all kind of activity out there and the more of that we have, the better. And if people disagree with each other, as far as redefining what media literacy means; that's what's important and people are really trying to put out their vision and share that vision with other people. And as long as they're doing that in a sincere way, not trying to belittle other people's work or for ego satisfaction but doing it because there's a tremendous need out there and they're trying to contribute in helping other people in some way to help them understand the media. Whatever that means is, as long as they're motivated by the desire to help people, what they do will eventually find an audience and I think that's another element we really have to think about. We are kind of moved to do this in a retail way rather than in a wholesale way. We have to do the best we can and hope that it's going to influence people and if it influence one or two people, then that's great. You're probably never going to be able to come up with something that speaks to everybody in the field overtime. We have an impossible situation to make that happen. It just won't happen. We have too many different types of people with too many different kinds of background and different agendas.

And even if that weren't the case, the phenomenon, the field of media changes so fast. We just have to pick out target groups and help them have their Aha! Experience. That's the fun part. Although that might only happen to a handful of people each time, that's what you have to be satisfied with. You can't look at a grand scheme, okay I'm going to put out the one and only definition of media literacy and you all are going to accept it, and we are going to be carving it on monuments to be passed on for generations. In a certain way, I think most fields have to move in that direction because the way we think of our society sociologically, the economics of things, the political system across the social sciences and the physical sciences too. There's so much that's changing, it's getting more and more specialized. For example physicists, the guy in the office down the hall from you talks a totally different language than you if you're a physicist although you're both physicists, and you both have PhD's in physics. You know you're so specialized in your training or biology or whatever the fields are that explores the information that it's so much that it's pushing us farther and farther from one another. That doesn't mean that we can't find a niche audience that we can contribute our thinking to, it's just that we can't pull everybody together and get us all thinking the same way. The world just has too much of a variety to it now.

That's why one of my biggest issues is sorting through the priority between skills and competency. Competency, is categorical; either you have that competency or you don't, and then you have that competency where you're the master and that's really good. But with skills there's this huge continuum where you always get better, there's never really an ultimate end point on that. I think a lot of people look at us in media literacy and expect us to deliver competency -- elementary school students, high school students, even college students. They pass the bar, they've ascended to a certain level and now they're in a category where they are a media lover and they can handle the media. But what we're really dealing with here, is that we are on the continuum and we are trying to nudge people a little bit better and a little bit better as long as we can orient them to what this continuum is and how they can get better, then we can leave them alone and they will continue to work on it and continue to get better. But for outsiders who look at the media literacy movement and say "Geez, how many people have you made media literate?" That's not the right question, because the answer is "None!"

TJ: Nobody is THAT media literate!

JP: Yes, the more you study the media the more humble you are. The proportion of the information among the media that you've mastered goes down the more you study it because as you study, you realize the media information grows at a much faster rate than your pile of knowledge does. A person's proportion of knowledge mastered is always getting smaller relative to the phenomenon being mastered, but that's a good thing because you realize how big the phenomenon is and that in itself is also an important bit of learning.

Just the explosion of books…I'm going to quote one of the introductions to one of my books to humble people. The number of books that are published just in the United States each year goes up but that's not publishing, but anyone could become a publisher now. The latest figure I saw was that 290,000 books were published last year in the United States. That's not articles or memoirs, those are just things that are regarded as books and that are listed in the Library of Congress. And that's probably a gross underestimation. You think, "Wow how long would it take me to just read the books that are published this year? "

If you read a book every two minutse and never slept for a year then you'd be able to get through this year's publications. And that's just books; you wouldn't be able to watch TV or news. But we are doomed further and further behind if we want to keep up with media and again you just have to get comfortable with that because if you're obsessive compulsive, which a lot of those academics are, we want to master everything, we want to pull it all together, we want to have all the great ideas on our phy sci's so we feel like we have mastered it. We're beyond that point, to get comfortable with the idea that mastery is kind of an 18th century concept. You have to celebrate what your real interest is in and do the best that you can, you have to move on with your skills and try to put together information to give to an audience to help them and do the best you can. And then that's where your satisfaction is supposed to come from not from mastering it. You'll never be able to do that.

What scares me the most about higher education is that in my career I've seen a real shift in focusing on a mastery of knowledge rather than development of skills. That, I think, is a big mistake. There are a lot more faculty who are dumbing down courses by focusing on conveying info-bits rather than helping students develop their skills and critical thinking. The reason for that

is that there's so much pressure put on faculty to be so many different things, service and research in addition to teaching. So even as a teacher you have to automate your course and when you do that you really focus on the info-bits you don't have time to work with students to have them do writing and then you edit it and then you teach them how to format. I mean that is really detailed teaching and we have less and less and less ability to do that. Such that, when students leave college what they have learned is how to cram for an exam.

So what they have is a wheelbarrow of info-bits that have a half life of maybe three or four years, which means that every year they're out of college, their college degree loses value as the memorized information goes out of date. Whereas if students graduate from a program with significant development of skills that they can continue crafting in their lifetime if they understood the strategies of skill development then the value of their education gets stronger and stronger over time. But yet what we have is all of these students who have information crammed into their minds and then we dump them into the deep end of our culture which is information saturated, and a lot of them just drown because they don't know how to navigate their way through that to think for themselves and build an argument. They've been trained by professors to memorize facts rather than learning how to critically evaluate information.

Things are going to continue to go in the same direction in higher education unless we confront this situation. It's a really dangerous one. We are pressured to churn out more and more college graduates each year because administrators are interested in making sure that students are graduating on time. It's a very institutional, factory type of mentality and that works; they put the resources behind that. But if you look at the skills that they have, can they analyze difficult problems, can they do certain things really, really well -- like access new forms of media – can they develop quick contacts with other people, or can they just get a lot of superficial information on Google and Facebook? Students are very advanced in parallel processing and multitasking. So they have some significant skills that they build on their own, but those skills come from the culture and their own challenges that they set up on their own. But when they go into higher education, they have an old model that trains students in areas that are just outdated. The new models aren't there in higher ed, and a lot of the students are being turned off.

TJ: What do you feel is your most important priority to be working on right now?

JP: Well, my priority is to continue updating Media Literacy and to try to make my contribution with that. For myself, my challenges are to get better as a consumer of the media. I need to understand these things more, so I have to play around with Twitter and Facebook and whatever comes down the pipe next year and the year after that, and play the games online and do all that stuff. I have to do that, and each year it gets harder and harder because with some of the media, you just have to go off into a different culture. For example, with tweeting …To me that just looks so trivial, why would I do that? Why would I want to tell people that I'm going out to check my mail now? Who is interested in that? But there are people who are! You have to get into that mindset, and it doesn't come natural to me. I want to understand what is it that attracts people to that so much. That's been a bit of a struggle, but if I don't do that, if I don't watch *16 and Pregnant* or *Pimp my Ride*, or *Jersey Shore* -- if I don't know who Snookie is -- then I lose touch with the next generation and the things are important to them. If you want to be a part of today's culture, you've got to go with the flow.