Voices of Media Literacy
International Pioneers Speak: Guillermo Orozco Gomez Interview Transcript

GUILLERMO OROZCO GOMEZ
INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS
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 (Quote)

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Guillermo Orozco Gómez serves in the Divisions of State Studies and Society, Cultural Studies, Communications Studies, Education Studies at the University de Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. He earned masters degrees in communication and in education, and a doctor of education from Harvard University after earning his undergraduate degree in communication sciences at the Jesuit University of Guadalajara (ITESO); he expanded his pedagogical studies at the University of Cologne. He is active in the Mexican Academy of Sciences, a member of the SNI, level III and a participating member of UNESCO's UNITWIN Network for Media and Information Literacy, as well as the Global Alliance for Partnerships in Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL).

INTERVIEW TEXT

Tessa Jolls: *Please tell us how you became involved in media education?*
                               What attracted you to the field? What were some of your early
                               experiences?

Guillermo Orozco Gómez: Communication Sciences was my academic field during my
                               university studies in Guadalajara, Mexico. I graduated as a
                               "communicator" in 1974.

During my studies, in summer 1972, I participated in a Social Service Project designed to develop a Radio Education strategy to teach basic Spanish language skills to a dispersed *Tarahumaran* Indian community at northern states in Mexico. This was my first challenge to link media and education, although using media to teach Spanish.

During '73 to '75 I worked with an NGO (Non Government Organization) to help out people coming from rural parts of the country. These immigrants were abandoning the fields in agriculture to come to the big cities to get a job for surviving. They were just incorporating at the edge of the cities without houses, and just fabricating whatever they could to have a small shelter, and access to water. In this situation and environment, I was trying to do, firstly, some instructional work using audiovisual media , so that they could have a better sense of how a big city looks like, and which type of public services they could look for.

During this job I discover the book of a great educator and philosopher: Paulo Freire, a Brazilian teacher who developed a pedagogical methodology for adults literacy : *"The Pedagogy of the Oppressed".*

Freire was trying to implement something dialogical with people, and I decided to try his approach. Then, after my first approach focused in providing these new inhabitants information, I formed groups with adults and adolescents, so that they could talk about their living conditions and especially how and why were they leaving the countryside to come to the big city.

I wanted to help these people to process that experience, and I translated ideas about their movement in pictures and in drawings done by themselves. We used this visual material to facilitate conversation among them, so that they could talk about their migration experience easily and in more analytical terms. The main issue was that they didn't want to move from their homes, but they had to, because in the countryside they were starving. I thought it was important for them to discuss their thoughts and idea about this and analyze their memories to be able to understand better and more critically the causes of their

poverty and the kind of chances they had to improve their economic and political situation at the edge of the city.

I think, that was my beginning in this field of media education, since I used some slides, pictures, drawings made by the participants, songs and stories told by themselves and other media materials in order to inspire thoughts and a better understanding about their problematic circumstance.

TJ: ***What were some milestones that you noted along the way?***

GOG: From that experience, I realized that I needed a more organized pedagogical structure for my thoughts about education using media. I applied for a scholarship to go to Germany, and I got that scholarship from the German Department of Academic Interchange. I went to Cologne University to study didactics.

Quite frankly I didn't like that program, and so after one year I went back to Mexico City. I started to work at the *Barros Sierra Foundation*, a research center for "future studies" in education, supported by the Mexican Ministry of Education.

I was very lucky to be at this center, because a professor from Harvard University came for his sabbatical year to work with us, and I became part of his team for two years. That is why I decided to go to Harvard University, to study at the Education School, where they invented *Sesame Street.*

I hope I'm making it clear that all during my career, I've been moving in two fields -- from communication to education, to education from communication, from media sometimes emphasizing more the media side, other times emphasizing more the dialogic experience with people.

Ultimately, I got disappointed with *Sesame Street,* because although it was a novel way to do some innovating teaching with/from Televisión, this effort was not intended to transform the relationship between teaching – learning itself. Viewers were taken as recipients of information (at least during the first years of this TV program).

My PHD dissertation in Harvard (1988) was the confluence between family education, school education and television "education". That was informal education from television, not formal education, as it was with Sesame Street. I started with the hypothesis that people learn much more from regular television than from any other institution around.

With my research, I saw that most of the students were learning different things from television and other media such as film. Depending on the type of family and the intervention families were making with their children, children were more or less influenced by television and other media. I said, "We need to do something for media education." And that's when I came to the realization and decision that my main interest professionally and academically was media education.

TJ: *What an epiphany! You came to this great insight that media education is more about teaching people how to deal with the media than it is to try to make the media the teacher.*

When you had this insight, where did you go from there, Guillermo? What did you decide to do to achieve your goal of helping people understand media?

GOG: I thought that we had to develop certain materials, didactic materials, so that we could facilitate media education. What I discovered was that at least in Mexico, educators did not understand the role of television in their students' learning and lives.

In Mexico, teachers do not bring their students' learnings from media to discuss in classes. Teachers make a division between education -- the responsibility of the educational system and of the schools -- and TV, a cultural-entertainment institution without a "credential to teach". Teachers say: "No, I don't like television, I don't care about television, I don't want to know anything about television in the classroom."

After many interviews with teachers and school principals, it was clear to me that teachers in Mexico saw television as something that students do outside the classroom, and they did

not want to deal with it. Teachers made TV one of their main enemies in the schools.

That understanding goes directly against what the great philosopher John Dewey said: *if students are learning something outside the school that influences their learning process inside the classroom, then, that outside learning had to be taken into account … it would be the responsibility of the teachers to analyze that learning.*

At first, I thought that the main problem was to convince teachers in the educational systems to introduce some media education questions and topics, to think more critically about what everybody was watching. I discovered that teachers were watching soap operas, even if they never admitted it to students. They told me, "Professor, yes, we watch this and this and this, but we don't tell the students we are watching soap operas."

I thought this was something I might change. I designed a magazine with a lot of pictures and drawings, and with the permission of the Mexican Educational System authorities, the material was sent to the schools. Some schools took some care of that for a while, but then they did not pay much attention.   But I considered that this experiment was a first "call to attention"

 I've been always attempting to influence the educational system from the top, so that media education or some type of media literacy could be considered formally within the teaching plans and school policies. But this hasn't been the case, at least in Mexico. Media education is still not embedded in the system. Now recently, with information requirements for managing all the digital tools we have, professors and teachers are more willing to introduce courses on media education, but courses at the technical level -- not for addressing the critical thinking in using the digital tools.

TJ: **That seems to be a common problem around the world, even now. In regards to the field of media education and media literacy, do you feel that you've seen change in the field itself as well as just in your conditions in Mexico?**

GOG: Let me tell you something about an effort to build up some kind of international movement on media education in the '90s.

A colleague of mine from Spain, Roberto Aparici, was trying to get together the more Anglo-Saxon view about media literacy and the Latin American view on that. He received some funding from UNESO in the mid-90's -- '94, '95 and '96 -- for doing in sequence three meetings in La Coruna Spain. Roberto gathered people from the British Film Institute, colleagues from the CLEMI in Paris, colleagues from United States and from about ten Latin American countries, as well as Spain and Italy.

We started to see that we could have a real world movement for media education. We were trying to discuss the differences in the more Anglo-Saxon orientation to critical thinking – we were looking at media literacy in terms of the different languages and the different technical approaches. Here in Latin American countries, we were more oriented to critical thinking development, not only analytical thinking , so that kids would perceive what was wrong or good in TV contents.

Barry Duncan was a marvelous bridge between two hemispheres in the world for media education. At that point, Barry Duncan and I went to a congress organized in Sao Paolo Brazil by Roberto Aparici and Ismar de Oliveira, who is a leader in media education in Brazil and in the Latin American world as well.

We had a congress in Sao Paolo and included people from English-speaking countries. It was a success and from that, Barry Duncan offered to organize the next congress in Toronto. We had the Toronto meeting at the end of '98. Roberto Aparici was negotiating the terms of the conference, and the participation. He was very, very careful about the translations, knowing that we wanted to be understood and heard by our English speaking colleagues.

John Puengente said "Yes, we are going to have translation, don't worry about that" and they had translations. But they had translations only for the main conferences given in English by English speaking colleagues to the Spanish assistants . They didn't

translate the other way around. Then, we Spanish speakers were not translated into English, so that English speakers would understand what we were saying. We were really angered by this Congress, and Barry Duncan was really disappointed too. The efforts to get together this small community was on the floor. We thought "Okay there are differences," but we felt really badly treated and offended by our English-speaking colleagues.

TJ: **You were disenfranchised in terms of being heard. This is very painful, and very sad – a loss for the field, for sure.**

GOG: Yes, it was a really bad experience. We did not think that it would happen, but it happened. From there on, academicians- haven't made other really important attempts to interchange and get together and have a common agreement about what media education is.

UNESCO has come into the picture in recent years, offering materials, analyses, etcetera, and of course, international conferences, and this has helped. But, I would like to talk about the approaches that caused different understandings.

TJ: **Yes...**

GOG: At first, we –Latin Americans-- were placed ideologically in a more defensive or protectionist approach. We thought that we had to give tools to teach people to defend themselves from the TV messages. We were oriented more by perspectives which focused on ideological content of the messages. Efforts in the '70s, '80s and even '90s, were directed to the content and the protectionist approach to media education. At that time. The book: "*Promote or Protect*…………." published by Ulla Carlsson in '99 or '98, captured very well the two different perspectives: the protect one emphasized the defense, and the promote was trying to make people analytical and aware of what they were interacting with, but not in a defensive way but in a more proactive and empowering way.

I don't think we have superseded this debate between defend or promote, and I think this remain as a main difference between

northern hemisphere countries and southern hemisphere countries.

The other thing that we have to supersede now, is the "instrumental perspectives" on media education. I recognize that mastering digital technology is a key for being able to go further to a more analytical level. But that do not necessarily mean real understanding of the whole package.

During many years, media educators wanted to give students a different ideology, a "correct" vision to interpret reality. Now, I think that educators in general, but especially media educators, have to be able to make evident to the viewer what is presented in the screens, discourses that are not evident by themselves. For example, hate speach, racism, sexism, classicism, and etcetera.

We need to get critical through thinking and the tools we need to promote are the analytical tools for the mind, so that anyone can arrive to a decision, critical or not, but people need to arrive at a conscious position about what they are dealing with in media and or in other technology.

TJ: **It's the analytical process that can be global, in this sense, something that we can encourage no matter where the person is from. It also can address any ideology, it can address any particular political situation. It's the thinking that counts, the habits of mind…**

GOG: Yes, I think so too. If we just focus on children and adolescents about dealing with media content and propositions, I think that we have to stress the abilities to produce and exchange new insights and content and be able to think about the process of constructing them. In a way we could make creators to think about what they wanted to say and what others interpreted they said, and think about the causes of that difference.

Here, my focus is to understand what could be the motivation that children and adolescents go through by dealing with media and technology,… I thing, this can facilitate an understanding of

their approach of doing things, and of sharing things, and would teach us through which type of production children interact with…

We, media educators, need to know more about the children's actual motivations and desires to produce and interchange information and knowledge throughout social networks. For example, one of the adolescents' major interest in writing is to be read by others, not to get a good grade in grammar class in the school.   As educators, we need to change the reason "why" to encourage students do something. We would like students to say, "I write because I want others to read what I wrote". Or: "I want to say this, because I want others to interact with what I said."

This is what I'm exploring now as a pedagogy for media education. I want to push people to create and to do something so that others can read that, enjoy that, contest that, and exchange ideas and grow a dialogue. I believe that this is the best motivation for children to be aware communicators, and to be analyzing what they create and interchange.

TJ: *That helps answer a question: where would you like to see things go?*

GOG: I would like to go even further to provoke young people to be hackers   in a nice way – in the way where being a hacker means to take a challenge to go further, not in order to destroy, but to take on a challenge to supersede propositions in the way of doing things. The motivation is like in a video game, go to the limits so that you can get the first position and win. This situation in video games is the reason why children and adolescents can spend hours in front of a video game: they are emotionally , not intellectually, stimulated to go further and further and further …

That gives the players some happiness. I deal with students and I'm looking at some colleagues working here, and we can see how that happiness motivates people to keep themselves engaged, to invent and discover new ways of doing something different as it was done before.

The pedagogical intervention from a media educator (in the case of videogames) would be to push the gamers analyze and go

deeper and deeper into the meaning of what they are doing in their interactions with the plot of the game and with others gamers.

TJ: *When you think about where you would like to see the field to go, you'd like to see more emphasis on discovery, on production, on exploration. Are you seeing that media education is going in that direction, and that there is more acceptance of that educational philosophy, or do you feel like it's being frustrated at a very deep level?*

GOG: Yes, I think we are moving in the positive direction.

I will speak about my country, Mexico. Here there is more acceptance for incorporating creative approaches through technology in some schools. Teachers are getting more involved in technology and they are more tolerant about mixing media and technology with education in the classroom. Today everybody has to be involved in technology in some minimal way to survive. I hope that this helps the media education movement, so that we go from survival to a more profound approach to media education.

I think the media education movement gives people hope. I really appreciate what UNESCO is trying to do, facilitating that around the world by getting people together from different cultures and countries, and pushing people to think about what they want to do now, or later in the future.

This is a movement that could be very productive to get not only more insights about media education, but to feel that we are coming to something visible for our effort to promote media education. This is another challenge we have as media educators: we need to know and to feel that we are not alone. UNESCO is helping us feel just that: we are not alone.

TJ: *I think UNESCO's pulling these international meetings together has been very helpful, yes. Now, thinking about surprises through the years with the field, have there been any things that have surprised you about the way things have developed or has it just unfolded and you take it as it comes? Did you have some*

expectations that you felt like "Well, I didn't expect that but here we are."

GOG: Difficult, but a crucial question for a media educator!! I would say that with the years, I have come to the feeling (a feeling for now, not yet a conviction) that we, media educators, have to abandon emphasis on teaching about the media and about our ideal relationship with them, in order to emphasize how to deal and to be creative with media, and even transcend that.   This includes the discussion of audience's communication rights, on the one hand, and on the other, push audiences to be "hackers". In this endeavor, our role as media educators would be more of a companion and as facilitator to get them connected to others, to feed their creativity through technological devices and information.

TJ: **Do you have any advice or any special message for media education practitioners?**

GOG: We need to keep in mind and heart the hope that we can transform the lives of citizens as audiences. I'm really convinced about this. I will continue working on that from different sides with different intensity according to the circumstances, and I invite others to develop networks and to do the same. This is our privilege as media educators and should be our hope for now and for the future.