



New Media Technologies Should Not Isolate Us. Just Extend Our Range of Social Skills

Interview with Ğorĝ Mallia

ABSTRACT

The interview focuses on Ğorĝ Mallia's views on the major challenges in the educational system and touches on the topics of media literacy, new media and power and utilization of social media. It deals with the ongoing discussion about the traditional linear model of education and introduces the theory of a hypertextual system. The given topics also refer to the transformation and shifts brought to society with the introduction of social networks, digital games and also other different new media. It points out social media can be a massive support to actual learning which has an impact, especially for the younger generation.

KEY WORDS

Social media. Education. Media literacy. New media.



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Gorg Mallia is a communications academic, author and cartoonist working on the island of Malta. He is the Head of the Department of Media and Communications at the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, University of Malta. He has a B.A.(Hons) in English Literature and an M.A. in Communications, both from the University of Malta, and a PhD in Instructional Technology, from the University of Sheffield, UK. He specializes in Print and Presentation Media, Personal Communications, Personal Branding, and Instructional Design and Technology (particularly Transfer of Learning). His present research is mainly on the processing change incurred by new media technology immersion. He has presented at a number of international conferences, and published in his areas of expertise. He has been a guest lecturer at the University of Malmö, and has lectured at the University of Lund, both in Sweden. Dr. Mallia has also produced and presented a number of programmes on national television and radio. He was the chairman of the National Book Council of Malta between 2005 and 2013. He is on the steering committee of the annual International Conference on Information, Communication Technologies in Education (ICICTE) that is held in Greece.

Ivan Rokošný (I.R.): So Dr. Mallia, you are pretty well-known in the academical and also the artistic environment in Malta and also in Scandinavia. Could you describe yourself in few words? Do you feel more like professor, illustrator, artist or all combined?

Gorg Mallia: I am one of those people, who finds it very difficult to sit for a very long period of time and be occupied with one thing. I am massively interested in any type of visual media. So yeah, I am a cartoonist, I also do illustrations for books, but not only that. I also wrote nine children's books and have also written literature for adults. I have published extensively in journals abroad, with focus on scope of my favourite areas and I have also written extensively in newspapers, especially about arts and literature and things like that. I have a variety of degrees, which I feel is really important – to have a proper educational background. That's the reason, I suppose, why I do all of this. I obtained my first degree in English literature, a general in Maltese literature. Later on, I did my masters in media and communications, which was the very first masters in that area at the University of Malta. Then I finished my PhD in educational technology. That's why I have a massive interest all around in a variety of areas. I continued in the academical sphere, and became head of the department of media and communications at the University of Malta. Apart from that, I've done television and radio and all of these things, generally because I like them. I like experimenting with different media, I like trying to find new and different ways of communicating with people.

Ján Proner (J.P.): What do you think is behind the rapid growth of social media use in the recent years?

Gorg Mallia: Well, first of all, there has been more of a change in the way we communicate in the last decades, than there had been in the previous two hundred years and the reason is very simple. It's an avalanche. People are social animals. You see, we cannot live in a vacuum, we can't live by ourselves. That is why we created societies, cities, villages. To be together, as a community. So obviously we are social people. When there is the possibility of being

social, all the time, it obviously changes everything. And then media technologies developed so fast that they allowed us the possibility of not just being social when you meet a person, but you can be social through your computer or smartphone, which we carry all the time with us. That means that you have just extended your range of social abilities. Logically it is in the nature of the beast - humanity, that we want to reach out and self-express our ideas – that's the nature of humanity. We can see this from the very beginning of civilization. For example, arts and the self-expression in the cave of Lascaux. It was not enough for those painters to catch the animals, they wanted to draw them on the wall. We need this, it could be instant gratification. The point is, in the past it was difficult to get instant gratification, in other words, it was difficult to get immediate reaction to what you say. Now it's easy, because of social media. Social Networks like Facebook, like Twitter, like Reddit, all of them. The whole point for them is that there is an instant reaction to what you pronounce, what you write, say, post, and that's of course, is what we are thriving on. Lots of people who are massively into social media, they get this buzz, that adrenaline rush, which you get when you start getting likes, that is all the reason behind it. I have to admit, I also do it, I also enjoy it. All of this spread like wildfire, because it hit in an area that makes it feel good. Because it's a socialisation process, which is 24/7, in other words, always there. In technology, even we, as researchers, can't keep up, with the advancement of the technology, because one thing leads to next, and with the massive advancement of bandwidth it is becoming close to impossible. The speed with which we can communicate, the speed with which we can actually convey our messages is astonishing. Even high-resolution images, moving from text to static images. now moving images. Just notice how a high percentage of what we see are animated gifs, or actual movies, none of these are just static images, and there is less and less text. The symbolic is slowly fading out of the picture, and we are becoming more and more *homo videns* instead of *homo sapiens*.

I.R.: Let's stay a little bit in the shift mentioned before. What do you think was the biggest shift brought to the society with the introduction of social networks, digital games and also another different new media which have the impact especially for the younger generation?

Ġorġ Mallia: Well let me start with this one. It's not just for the young generation, it is about immersion, how immersed you are, not only in social media. Funny thing, we used to call them, a few years ago, which seem like a hundred years ago now - new media technologies. In other words, technology that allows us to communicate directly with each other or indirectly, doesn't really matter in the end if the person is there. My theory and something I published a couple of papers on, is that what is happening is a conceptual change. We no longer process linearly, we process latterly, or in other words, what I like to call hypertextual processing. You know, I'm 61 years old. When I grew up without internet, without computer etc., the only way I could actually follow any thoughts was through the logical sequentiality, in other words, chronological processing – you go 1,2,3,4,5, etc. because that is the way you turn the pages of a book. Not anymore, now it is hypertext, now you go to a page, you click somewhere, you go somewhere else, not linearly. So, my theory is, that is the way a brain is also being wired now. That we no longer think in terms of linearity, but we actually jump from one note to the next. The only way, we can actually organize, this random hypertextuality is through tapping into the nodes of hypertextuality, like hyperlinks in the brain and actually get them to be ordered. And that is complex and problematic. What I do see, and this is pretty clear, from teachers who have been in post for a very long time for example. I have comments about how much less attention span students have now compared to a few years ago. They will talk about how they multitask a lot more than a few years ago. How they tend to jump from one subject to the next, and also how much more informed they are. There is enormous storage of information there, but the problem is accessing it. it's not easy, because there is no logical key for it, everything is random. So, this is the challenge, that's where we are, that's what the change is in my opinion. Predominantly for

the younger generation. We have gone beyond Prensky's digital natives and digital immigrants, we have gone way beyond that, because the generation that followed the digital natives, is made up of much more than natives, they are basically almost symbiotically linked to media technologies and I'm not talking just about the hardware, but also the actual environment, that they become part of. And when we move towards the virtual reality of course, that is not just becoming psychological, but is becoming actually physical. But this is for a discussion for another day because that's something, that really fascinates me because, the change is massive. And the problem is, that schools actually don't realise it - schools still teach linearly.

J.P.: Perfect. So, we can actually continue and link your last answer to the next question. Do you think that social networks, or digital games can be integrated in the educational process of classic school models and what pros and cons do you see in that?

Ġorg Mallia: Of course, they can be, the point is, that there is a contradiction in terms. It is said that social media are by their very own nature entertainment media instead of educational ones, and we are on social media, and we are enjoying them, because we know we are not doing it to learn something. So that is the reason for it. So, the moment you try to apply social media directly to pedagogical aims, you have subverted it. It's no longer the social media that we know, it's a totally different thing all together. So that is, where the problem is. The secret is in utilizing social media, if you like peripherally, in other words, don't try to utilize them in the way you utilize a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). Because the VLE is a carrier of learning. And social media are not a carrier of learning, they are carriers of information, entertainment, and all those things that we do willingly and voluntarily and not because we think we can learn from them. But social media can be a massive support to actual learning. Yes, there have been instances where experimentation has been done, with utilizing, for example, Twitter, for questions & answer sessions, or especially MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) now. But Even with MOOCS, don't try to integrate social media, let the participants in MOOCS interact with each other, converse, and discuss assignments on social media. For every single unit I teach, students have an informal social Facebook page, that is a closed page very often, where they discuss things, where they say negative things about lecturers (*laughter*). But it is a brilliant way of supporting educational organization. If we utilize them that way, it would be a massive success. If you try to actually subvert them in any way, you'll fail. I mean yes, you have for example Edmodo, which is basically Facebook for education, but how many people are on Edmodo? That's my question. I don't think there is an enormous number of people on it. It has been fed to us Edmodo, you know, as clean Facebook. And then there are places like Israel or Canada, where teachers cannot interact with students using social media. It is illegal to do so, so they use Edmodo or something similar, because they are educational. But in the end, I do believe: One, that there should be an interaction between students and teachers, which goes against the criteria a lot of countries are now following, where there is a prohibition, if you like. And two, that there should be an ethical line, where the ethics are clearly specified as to what can be done, and what can't be done, because this is very important, because abuse is extremely easy in cases like these. In the meantime, this peripheral use of social media is encouraged. Because, teachers are a bit cowardly, they are massively afraid of being upstaged. The point is that, they don't realize they have been upstaged entirely by technology by now. The old concept was that the teacher was on the stage and then constructivism sort of decided that there was no more stage, but he or she was the guide on the side. And it goes beyond that, the guy on the side is now the computer. It's now a mobile phone. The teacher is a skill giver, the teacher is the person who actually helps students make sense of what they see. Teachers are no longer instructors, but educators and that is the true. Unfortunately, schools don't always notice this. There are a number of education institutions that are experimenting with this sort of loose curriculum. I know one in Denmark, in Copenhagen for example, and



there are definitely other cases. But in the main, top down schooling remains. I don't know how it is in your country, but in my country, there is an effort being made to make education more comprehensive. But in the main, it remains, the teacher up there, the students down there. Basically, the top down method, where the teaching is linear. So, that's my opinion, I'm quite controversial, whenever I discuss this there can be a lot of heated argument. I actually edited a book on the use of social media in education a few years ago. It was a weird book, actually it started as a workshop in a conference I co-organized. I started the discussion half-jokingly, let's discuss it: how about social media and education. Jokingly, because I knew the answers would be: "no it can't be done, social media is not intended for pedagogical aims". And I was amazed about the discussion we had. And a few of the academics there went home and spent a year experimenting. Somebody in Israel created a Facebook page about a dead Palestinian mathematician, who was fictionally working as admin of the page. And the kids actually interacted, sent question, got answers and it was massive experimentation and then they came back the following year with papers for the conference. That actually kicked off the idea for the book, which was apparently massively popular. Not so long ago I was proposed to update it with a newer version.

I.R.: I would like to continue little bit in this area. In your research area, you often touch the topic of media literacy. I would like to connect it and ask. In the educational process, what do you think about the older generations of lecturers. Should they change their methodology or do you think it is not possible?

Gorg Mallia: The older generation, we don't want to talk across the board, especially in media literacy, a lot of teachers my age, are massive users of technology, etc, and very media literate. And then there are people half my age or less, who are actually, well, I'm using a word, which is no longer popular: Technophobes. It is reality, you see it, I lecture, among other things, also about software like Photoshop and you see young people just looking at it and not knowing what to do. The point is, more than the older generation I'm talking about across all of teaching. Yes, younger teachers are of course more from Prensky's digital natives' side, and logically there is going to be more interaction on their level. As I said before, teachers are massively afraid to be up staged, and they are terrified of students, knowing more than they do. And we are living in the age of mobile information giving and getting. In other words, every student

who needs to know something, all S/he has to do is just look it up and S/he has it. And because they are afraid of being upstaged teachers would rather leave that aspect out of the classroom. Which is ridiculous, because that means those kids who now live and breathe the technology and use it as their interaction with the world out there, are deprived of it. Meaning, they are feeling completely out of context. So, what teachers need to do at this point of time is accept that students are better instructed in the technology than they are, and take it from there, instead of the top down style in which the teacher knows best and the student knows nothing. We must accept that students know a hell of a lot, and the teacher has still powerful abilities, considering s/he knows pedagogics, and who is capable of actually understanding how the mind works, will help the student get most out of that learning. That's what we need to do, but unfortunately that's not going to be easy, because of ego. First thing we need to do is accept, that this is the reality of the day, because there is always someone who says: "ah, back in the good old days, etc." This is it, it is reality.

J.P.: Ok, let's take it from there. I would like to continue with a concrete example, so how do you approach media education, here, at your department or university in Malta?

Ġorġ Mallia: The Department of Media and communications started off as a program of the Faculty of Arts, and then moved on as a department of the Faculty of Education. It was decades ago, and the intention was, that teachers cannot, make it without a solid understanding, of what media and communication are all about. That was the whole point of that. Then we moved on to our own centre and eventually faculty. What we do is, we try to acclimatize our students to understanding what is happening around them. It's not easy. Why? Speaking of our students, it's mainly because the immersion is so massive. I will come to teachers in a minute. In fact, I have accepted a number of students to attend a lot of courses, the we give here. There is an agreement between me and the head of department of primary education, so that their students join a few of our classes. It's because we address their needs particularly. What the teacher is, is a communicator. Full stop. The teacher is a communicator. When the teacher is a bad communicator, that's not a teacher. Teachers and other communicators communicate ideas, thoughts, as clearly as possible to human beings. So, what we try to do in this department, is to actually, desensitize the concept of media communication. I'll put in a brief example, or metaphor if you like. We are in the middle of a crowd, and it is really hard to say how big the crowd is, it's really difficult to understand who the people around you are, because you are in the middle of it and you can't. But then somebody takes a drone photo of the crowd and you see it and you realize how big the crowd is and you actually individuate the individuals. We are in middle of a communication crowd. We are immersed in communication and media, it's part of our life, it's who we are. There is no telling to 18-19 years-olds: "Okay, so here is the change" because there is no change in their mind. This is their one reality. This is what we need to do, desensitize that. We need to explain about the change, we need to understand exactly, what it is, and what impacts it is having on, individual as well as collective lives and communities. And how to actually utilize all of that in such a way that you are not just an acceptor of what's happening, but also a producer of what is happening as well. You are in a circle, you need to understand it in order to do it. So obviously, when teachers are there, we direct, the learning to the classroom, because there you have a captured community and it becomes much easier to communicate with a collective. Media and communication studies open minds, and make you more aware on what is happening. We can manage that, and we succeed in this biggest step. Taking it from there is bonus, creating your own videos, creating your websites, using social networks in your own way, all of that, for me is a bonus. The essential thing is understanding, knowing impacts. Being able to do research in an area that you will then gain a lot more knowledge about what is happening. Because we are so immersed that it very difficult to have an honest view of what's happening.

I.R.: Let's move on to another scope, which is also connected with previous answers. In your work you write a lot about the term informal learning. Can you deconstruct that in a few words?

Gorj Mallia: Well, that shouldn't be problem, because that's my next book by the way (*laughter*). First of all, what I like to call, it is not just informal learning. It is also independent, informal, accidental, acquisition. It's quite complex. Why? Because when we talk about informal learning, we are doing that right now. We are having a chat. As informal learning you have a bit of information from me, you are absorbing it, you are applying it to your own ideas, etc. It's happening quite a lot and you don't even know about it. The problem of all of this is again in the organizational base of it. Because there is so much of it. It used to be called useless information. Because we have lot of it. And all of this is also difficult to access. Because, we as a university institution, we try to assess people, in the end. We want to know how much you learned so what we do is set tests, assignments, exams, etc. And we base a skill level on the grade. How can you do that with informal learning? Basically, you don't. Lots of universities across the world now are actually adopting a policy of accepting what we call prior learning. For example, if you have worked as a computer engineer for a long time, but you don't have formal learning, you will be accepted in a computer engineering course. Because you have been doing it. France started it, I think Australia does it a lot. A lot of people are doing it. Obviously, that is definitely the case with MOOCs, because obviously what you know, is what you will bring to the table. And of course, there is Blockchain now, which will create a much more user-based assessment methodology than formal analysis, that institutions like universities apply. Blockchain, can for example, create a register, where a lot of people put information, and because they put a lot of things in there, an independently administered register of learned abilities is generated that, in the end, becomes the assessment, which leads to your certificate. The certificate is based on what has been put in there by a large number of people who have met you, who worked with you, etc. That concept leads to incorruptibility, if you like. There is the possibility, that, in the future that might be the way we assess informal or prior learning. Things you acquire along the way. The problem with informal/incidental learning is, that it is not easily accessed by formal institutions, who actually give out certificates that you then need to get work. My argument is, that this is the downfall of universities in a sense, unless they actually take this on board and utilize it. There is going to be quite a problem. Things like MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses which were actually reacted against, by most universities to begin with, are now being taken on by them. They are most specifically intended to utilize the learning that people get along the way. My argument is very simple. Going back to my own theory of hypertextual processing, the more people process hypertextually, the less room there is going to be for formal institutions, and more for the acquisition of knowledge on the go, especially with technology advancing towards mobiles/smartphones. So, I think, we are going to see, in the future, less people going for formal education and more people just getting the learning on the go. So, with formal universities or institutions, it's a conflict, it a massive conflict. I mean, the University of Malta is also a traditional teaching university. You get it everywhere in the world, I also lectured in two universities in Sweden. The first is quite traditional and this is one of the best universities in the world Lund University, where I guest lectured. And then there is Malmö University, which has been promoted from a college to university recently, and it looks at the practical side of things. The wonderful thing about places like Sweden is, that you can do a few units in Lund and then you can do few other units in Malmö. I actually taught students in Lund who then came for courses in Malmö. So that's the wonderful thing. That is the way forward. But when you keep being institutional minded and limiting yourself and creating barriers, in my opinion it's a way back.

J.P.: So, we discussed the current situation, even looked back to the past. This question might sound a bit relative but, what do you personally honestly think about the future of media literacy. What are the challenges for example in 10 years' time?

Gorg Mallia: We will be going further, and further towards this point of informal acquisition. It is already clear. People like myself, who adore face to face lecturing, are going to become rarer and rarer, because students already object to be in a classroom context. And of course, you can get something within a classroom context that you can never get on an individual level outside of it. But the flexibility and the fact that you want to do this on your own, voluntarily, to get this information are assets. You know, I'm the sort of person, who, if I like something I want to know everything about it. If I like a bit of music by someone, I'm going to look that person up, I'm going to listen to all the songs that person released. Read about the person, go through Wikipedia (to begin with) and take it from there. I'm just like that. And if I'm like that, I can just imagine how younger people are. In the past the information was doled out, now the information is at source. So, the best change that happened in an educational context is, that, there is a thirst for information, and there is also a source for that information for that thirst to be satiated. For me, the only way forward for institutions is to accept this change and run with it. There is so much that can be done. You know, the concept of *this is education*, it's quite old now. People like Michael Grahame Moore - one of the people who created the concept of distance education. That was brilliant at the time, because it moved learning away from the institutions, from the geographical institutions, which is absolutely wonderful because it meant that you could actually work from home. But even that is no longer enough, a lot of universities shifted ordinary learning from the classroom to online portals. Even that is not enough, because it still formalizes the way of teaching. I think we need to put in a lot of money to research, how we can the way of informal/independent learning. How institutions can take that on board. How they can create the contexts in which that learning can be made more concrete and more utilizable. Because there is a large amount of wastage of that learning, because it's not controlled learning, it's totally uncontrolled. So, it's in the control of that learning, it's in the skills that you need to be able to elicit from that learning. It's in the keys to draw memories out for individual bits and pieces of that learning. That educational institutions need to aim it. They need to learn how to do that in order to convey it and utilize it, and believe me, that means we no longer spend all time giving information, but go immediately to the procedural. It's the procedural, that we need to work with, no longer content, because content is already there.

Prepared by **Ivan Rokošný** and **Ján Proner**