

Interview with Professor Arvind Singhal

by

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This personal interview of Professor Arvind Singhal was conducted by Dr. Mohammed Kuta Yahaya after five years of corresponding and exchanging views with him (mostly by email).

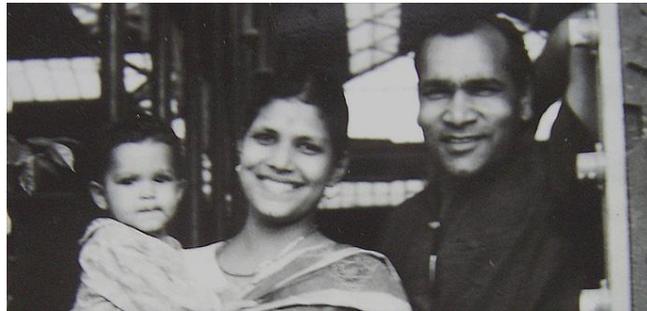


Mohammed Yahaya and Arvind Singhal 2004 Cape Town

Mohammed Yahaya: It is a pleasure to be with you. First of all, I will like you to share with our readers, your background, your insights into your growing up, your aspirations as a young person, and key influences on your life.

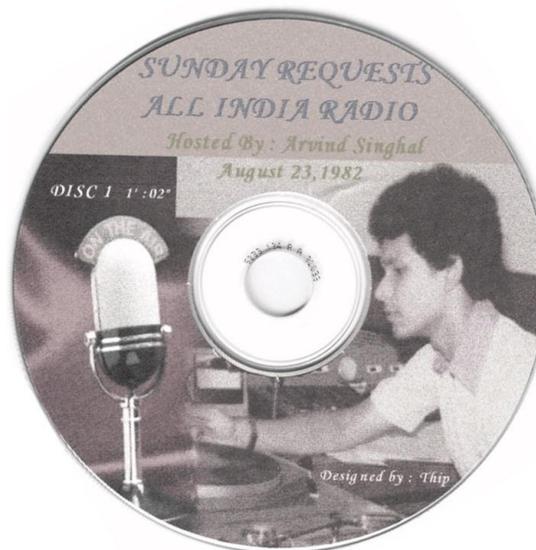
Arvind Singhal: A pleasure to meet you, Mohammed, especially after our long correspondence. I was born and raised in India. My fondest memories of childhood revolve around travel. My father was an Indian Railway Engineer and we were on the move from my early childhood [He in the 1980s worked in Nigeria for many years with the Nigerian Railway Corporation]. We lived in six or seven different locations in the first eleven years of my life and that was because my father was building railway tracks and bridges in the northern and eastern part of India. Moving in India from one state to the other it is like changing a country.

Language, ethnicity, food habits – everything changes. Further, as a railway engineer, my father had a railway carriage, a saloon on wheels, in which he went for inspections. It had a living room, a dining room, sleeping quarters, a kitchen, a few restrooms, and also quarters for the cook and helpers. For a child it was a home on wheels. We often traveled together as a family in the Indian states of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. In essence, from the time I was born, I have liked “movement”: it is an integral part of my being. And not just physical movement, but movement also in terms of working on different things, not being static, hopping across geographic and intellectual boundaries. Some find it strange that I have a Bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering, then worked extensively in radio, and now pursue an academic career in communication and social change. God knows what will come next?



Baby Arvind with his parents

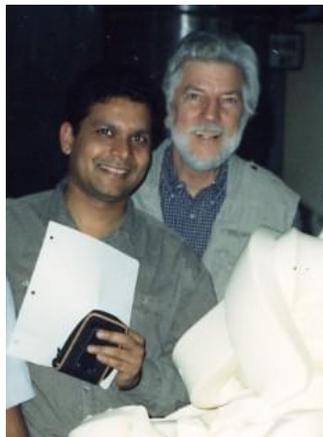
As a high school student, and while pursuing my engineering degree, my hobbies were writing, radio and television production. So it was natural for me to come to the U.S. to get a Masters degree in Radio-Television-Film. Then I said enough of media production, let’s move on to something else. So I enrolled for a doctoral degree in communication theory and research at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California.



Arvind in the Studios of All India Radio, New Delhi, 1982

My childhood upbringing of movement in all its manifestations included a very stable and supportive atmosphere at home. My parents always encouraged me to do all I wanted to. They were delighted, for

instance, when I decided to go for an MA degree in Radio-TV-Film after earning an engineering degree. That is not so typical in an Indian household where most believe that if you get an engineering degree, you usually stay with it. But my parents said “well, this is your interest, so proceed. We are with you.” So a sense of movement coupled with support at home propelled me into doing a lot of different things. When your heart is into things that have meaning, life automatically happens. So I found myself, at 22 years of age, working with perhaps the most noted, well-known communication scholar of social change, Professor Everett M. Rogers. After earning my MA degree, I had applied to Stanford University’s Institute of Communication Research for a doctoral degree, where Rogers was based. I was accepted with a fellowship. It was a dream come true -- to go to Stanford, on a fellowship, and to work with Everett Rogers. But then I found out that that he was moving to the University of Southern California (USC). For me it was more important to trail a mentor, than be hung up on an institution. I quickly made an application to Annenberg School for Communication at USC and fortunately was accepted. It was by being around Dr. Everett Rogers, and through his persona and his mentoring, that many learning vectors, many opportunities opened up for me. He treated me like an equal partner in research and writing and we did many projects together, yielding many publications. So my career got a boost through his kind nurturing.



Arvind and Ev Rogers During a Field Visit to India 1991

Mohammed Yahaya: It is amazing that you have achieved so much globally from all forms of intellectual assessment, yet you are so humble, unassuming, and calm. What is the secret?

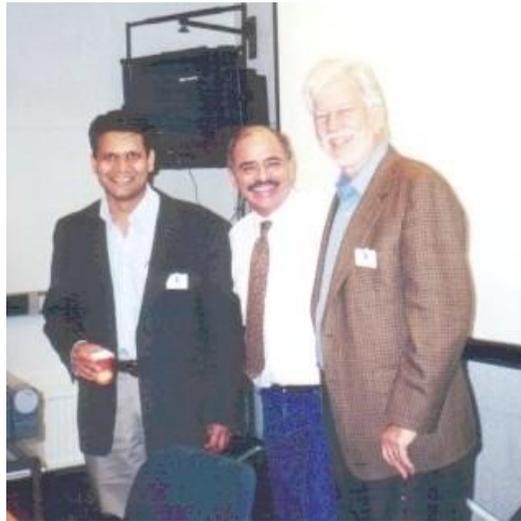
Arvind Singhal: You are very kind, Mohammed. I’ve realized that the more you think you know, the more you realize how little you know. I think that sort of summarizes my response to your kind question. The more you move around, the more places you go, whether geographic or intellectual, the more you spin your compass around, the more you realize how little you have fathomed.

Mohammed Yahaya: Wonderful! Kindly share your entertainment-education trademark with our colleagues, scholars, and students. How did you become familiar with entertainment-education? Also, could you outline some memorable moments in entertainment-education scholarship e.g. your presidential research scholar award, and some of your noted books on this topic?

Arvind Singhal: Strange things happen to us in strange ways. I wasn’t born with the intention of being a scholar of entertainment-education, though my mother told me many stories as a young child, as did my grandparents. These stories were clearly engaging but at the same time carried some messages. As a child, I remember going on long walks by the village canal and sugar cane fields with my paternal grandfather, who was a professor of mathematics – a very honest and righteous man – and that was often story telling

time. So, storytelling, narratives, and, I guess, “entertainment-education” were integral to my upbringing. It was a natural way of growing up as a middle-class child in India. Even in Nigeria, I am assuming you grew up with stories told by elders who, in essence, pass the generational wisdom down through narratives. However, of course, this doesn’t mean that everybody turns out to be entertainment-education scholar.

It happened to me by chance. When I was at the University of Southern California, in my very first semester, professor Everett Rogers showed a videotape in his nightly class of an Indian television soap called *Hum Log* (literally “we people”). I knew *Hum Log* because I had spent time in India that summer. I saw how it touched my 75 years old grandmother. We discussed *Hum Log* at meal times. So when Everett Rogers in his class talked about *Hum Log* as an example of entertainment-education, I said “Yeah, I have indeed seen the effect of this program in my own home, especially in terms of how it spurred conversations” So that was the formal turning point in my realizing the power of entertainment. That realization led me from one thing to another. Soon I was in Mexico City attending a workshop conducted by Miguel Sabido, the brilliant producer, writer, and director of television who had pioneered an entertainment-education methodology for soap operas. He was also quite instrumental in the formulation of plans that led to the implementation of the *Hum Log* soap opera project in India.

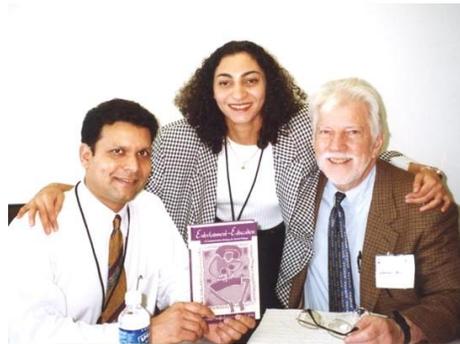


Arvind with Miguel Sabido and Ev Rogers 1988

So, as I said, one thing led to another. Soon we were funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to conduct an evaluation study of the effect of *Hum log* in India. That led to some publications, and in a few years we began to realize that there were several other people who were studying this strategy. I was fortunate to catch the first wave of scholarly publications that came out in entertainment-education. Previously, scholars had studied *Sesame Street*, *Cock Crow at Dawn* in Nigeria, and people who were studying *the Archers* in England. But I think those set of publications didn’t really coalesce into a mainstream entertainment-education movement. However, after the mid 1980s, numerous organizations began to engage in entertainment-education, including Population Communications International in New York, Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Communication Programs in Baltimore, and various others in Jamaica, Mexico, and Brazil.

My dissertation ended up as review of literature of the field of entertainment-education in all its manifestations going back to Greek theatre, looking at the use of television soaps, rock music, film, and others. That resulted some years later in a book, as you know, called *Entertainment-Education; A*

Communication Strategy for Social Change, which probably was the first book with E-E in the title. It came out in 1999; in 2004, we edited a comprehensive book called *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*. It has 22 chapters. These 22 chapters show the tremendous growth in E-E in the form of multiple voices, from multiple regions, and definitely involving multiple theoretical viewpoints and multiple methodologies. In essence, I found myself to be in the thick of entertainment-education, and when you are in the thick of it, then things began to thicken around you further. For instance, I have been involved in all the four entertainment-education conferences, including the first one that was held in Los Angeles in 1989 when I was a doctorate student. While E-E interests me, I have other interests too. I think with one of my feet I have stood steady in the field of entertainment-education; but with my other feet, I have been hopping around, exploring issues of organizing for social change, issues of media and corporate social responsibility, and so on.



Arvind and Ev Rogers with colleague Rasha Abdullah and their 1999 E-E Book

Mohammed Yahaya: The promise of entertainment-education is widespread in all developing countries, especially in Africa, Latin America, and Asia which are bedeviled with a number of social issues -- HIV and AIDS, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, wars, ignorance, and disease. But how can entertainment-education really help in this direction?

Arvind Singhal: Entertainment-education is a strategy, a tool, with all its promises and limitations. It can add sizzle to education and address, potentially, a wide variety of social issues -- reproductive health, HIV and AIDS prevention and control, and others. It is one tool in our long arsenal of what it might take to foster, nurture, and engender social change. Entertainment-Education cannot substitute for a clinic, it cannot substitute for antiretroviral drugs, it cannot substitute for microcredit which may be needed by poor families in rural Nigeria to up their standard of living. So it is only one tool and we should be mindful that it can only do so much. E-E works well when it is integrated with other tools and resources.

Mohammed Yahaya: Can you give any advice to young people especially in developing countries that who face issues of rural-to-urban migration, prostitution, crime, employment challenges, and so on? What hope can they generate from your experience?

Arvind Singhal: I am not sure what lesson my life holds for others, and I am unsure that I am in position to give any advice. I have, in many ways, despite my middle class background, led a privileged life. But if I had to say anything, I would say that pursue one's passion, if one has the opportunity to do so. Passion often translates into some kind of capital, which pays rich dividends at some point in one's life. So I was interested in a lot of things and I pursued them with some passion, enthusiasm, energy. I may not have been very good at most of them but the fact that I was passionate, willing to make mistakes and learn and still go on, kept generating the momentum for me. I don't know whether it is something which could be

perhaps equally meaningful or relevant if people don't have the opportunities to follow their passion. But I think there is much to be said about passion because I think it is one is interested and genuinely so in something, it is quite palpable to others around you.

I also see the importance of mentors not only in terms of doors that they can open for you, but in terms of imparting skills, and not necessarily classroom skills, or research skills, or theoretical skills, those of course are critical, but skills in terms of human relationships. How nice it is when people around you can model the importance of both the professional and personal aspects of human communication. I was very fortunate to have a wonderful mentor. I think our biggest legacy, as educators, will hopefully be issues of mentorship. How we deal with our colleagues and our students; how we work with them shoulder-to-shoulder. Publications – books, articles, conference papers -- can only do so much. If one can do more to shape, mould, inspire, influence, and transform a life or two, that has tremendous multiplier effect.



Doctoral students Yogita Sharma (Left), Saumya Pant (2nd from L), and Devendra Sharma (Extreme Right) with Arvind in Village Kamtaul, Bihar, India in 2003. *Taru Research Project.*

Mohammed Yahaya: As the fourth entertainment-education conference is here and almost over, what future do you see for entertainment-education? How do you see EE in the next decade.

Arvind Singhal: The fact that we are in the fourth international entertainment-education conference, and it is 15 years since the first conference, shows that we've covered some distance. But we have much distance to cover. I think the further institutionalization of teaching, research, and practice of entertainment-education in academic and other institutions is the next consolidation step. I hope for the good of the field that we continue to chart yet more exciting areas for entertainment-education, while we feel secure in the distance we have traveled so far.

Mohammed Yahaya: You have mentioned Professor Everett Rogers numerous times. As you know in the field of agriculture, development and social change, diffusion of innovations Everett Rogers holds a landmark position. Would you like to pay special tribute to him as your mentor, as your teacher, and someone you've worked with closely for several years now?

Arvind Singhal: Perhaps the most lasting impact that we can possibly have on the field of any discipline is through mentorship. Professor Everett Rogers is a true mentor. Through personal example he role modeled the life of a scholar, educator, a doer, a writer. I once overheard him answering a question by somebody who said, "Professor Rogers, how have you been able to make such a big impact in our field?". He smiled and said, "All I have done in my life is to plant small little acorns in the field and watch them grow into trees."

Mohammed Yahaya: Thank you very much.

Arvind Singhal: Mohammed, it's my pleasure.