

'Sesame Street': 40 years of educational entertainment



BREAK OUT the birthday cake for Big Bird, Cookie Monster and Oscar the Grouch. "Sesame Street" is 40 years old.

The children's program has become such a staple of American households that few viewers remember how revolutionary it was when it premiered on public television in 1969.

"Sesame Street" broke new ground by appealing to a multicultural and economically diverse audience, creating research-based programming and addressing real-life issues in a sensitive but understandable way for young children

During the 1960s, television became important entertainment in the lives of children. Youngsters watched TV an average of 27 hours each week. Most of the programming was dominated by morning cartoons.

Quality educational programming was almost nonexistent. The shows that existed tended to patronize children with a "show-and-tell" approach. Whether educational or animated, the programs catered to white, middle-class children and never addressed real-life problems.

Concerned about the vacuous nature of children's TV, Joan Ganz Cooney, a producer at WNDT-TV in New York, was awarded \$8 million by the Carnegie Foundation to establish the Children's Television Network and develop an educational program for preschoolers from low-income, minority back-

COMMENTARY

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grounds that was fast-paced, highly visual, repetitive and based on a curriculum with measured outcomes. The program, called "Sesame Street," revolved around an urban neighborhood – something quite different from the imaginary sets of other children's shows – and featured a multicultural cast.

Black and white actors of various ages teamed up with colorful, furry puppets (more affectionately known as "Muppets") to stimulate the minds of preschoolers, improve their letter and word recognition, and teach basic math.

Matt Robinson, a black actor, played "Gordon," a fatherly schoolteacher who was both hip and professional. "Susan," played by Loretta Long, was Gordon's wife. The couple used a mixture of proper English and street slang so that many children could relate to them.

"Big Bird," an 8-foot-2-inch yellow Muppet, showed children how to find the solution to problems. Oscar the Grouch, a furry green misanthrope, taught children about toleration and respect for people with different views and lifestyles.

The Children's Television Workshop (CTW), now Sesame Workshop, also used laboratory-oriented research to test the

success of the program. Never before had research or educational objectives been incorporated into a television production.

"Sesame Street" premiered on Nov. 10, 1969 on PBS and was an instant hit. With a budget of \$28,000 per episode, the show, in its first season, reached 7 million children a day.

The Educational Testing Service reported that the cognitive skills of young viewers had increased by 62 percent. As a result, CTW was able to procure millions more in grant money from the federal government, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Ford Foundation.

"Sesame Street" witnessed significant changes in its 40-year history. By 1979, nine million American children under 6 were watching the program daily, and 90 percent of children from low-income, inner-city homes regularly viewed the show.

Sesame Street's curriculum expanded during the 1980s to include real-life issues previously considered taboo for children's television. Hispanic and Asian actors were added to help the Muppets explain topics such as childbirth, death, disabilities and overcoming tragedies.

Today, "Sesame Street" remains the most influential children's educational program in television history.

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