

Curriculum Politics for Television:  
*Sesame Street and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*

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This fall has been the season of nostalgia for children's television: the fiftieth anniversary of *Sesame Street*'s first broadcast, the cinematic release of *A Wonderful Day in the Neighborhood*, with Tom Hanks starring as Fred Rogers, and the death of Carroll Spinney, longtime puppeteer who animated and voiced both Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch. Both *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* are no longer just children's shows but publicly lauded for their contribution to American culture in general – highlighted by the Kennedy Center Honors for *Sesame Street* in early December.

In the celebrations over these shows' cultural impact, there is a side to them that has been too little discussed: the creators of both shows worked to produce children's educational programming that was both different from and far superior to commercial children's television. In that, they succeeded. But they did so in very different ways—Fred Rogers in a slow, deliberative pacing that saw children's programming as having an obligation of pastoral care, and *Sesame Street*'s producers in a way that deliberately matched or even accelerated the fast pace and attention-grabbing obsession of commercial television. These differences were more than superficial; they reflected deep philosophical assumptions about childhood and early childhood education.

Those differences also reflected a dramatic shift in thinking about childhood in the postwar era and in the context of mass broadcasting. The television professions who worked on the shows had considerable experience in the first generation of television programming, a history that shaped their views of children's programming. They also had access to research professionals coming from different philosophies of childhood—for Fred Rogers, that meant working with the director of a community center co-founded by Benjamin Spock and Erik

Erikson. For the producers of *Sesame Street*, the connection was with a group of diverse researchers with keen interests in a broad range of child development issues that included and highlighted pre-academic skills.

In this way, we can look seriously at the two television programs embedded in the postwar intellectual history of debates over childhood. This perspective sees curriculum as the enactment of underlying philosophies. In his history of progressive curriculum debates, Herbert Kliebard pointed out subtle and deep connections between arguments about the good curriculum and arguments about the core purpose of education.<sup>1</sup> To him, it mattered that administrative progressives were interested in social efficiency, something that was *not* a consensus view of progressive educators. We take Kliebard's point more generally; curriculum politics is also intellectual history. For the two anchor programs of early national public broadcasting focused on young children, their curricular differences should be seen as embedded in the postwar intellectual history of childhood.

### **The Broader Context for the Development of *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood***

In June 1964, National Educational Television (NET) president John White wrote Fred Rogers to notify Rogers that NET would (again) decline to fund Rogers's proposal for a children's program in the United States. "This is regrettable and I am personally disappointed," White wrote. "I do trust, however, that you will find another happy outlet for your great talent during the next year."<sup>2</sup> White knew this decision meant Rogers would continue to produce the

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> John F. White to Rogers, June 19, 1964, EU5, "Pre-MRN history" folder, Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College. NET was funded by the Ford Foundation's Fund for Adult Education, and according to White the Ford

15-minute *Misterogers* program for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – the first time that Fred Rogers had appeared in front of the camera, after more than a decade working on television as stagehand, musician, puppeteer, writer, and producer. The CBC set shop created materials for the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, such as King Friday the Thirteenth’s castle and a wooden trolley, and the Canadian network’s children’s programming director, Fred Rainesberry, was able to capitalize on the relationship he had built with Rogers over the previous decade.<sup>3</sup>

Less than a decade after Fred Rogers fled to Toronto to produce a children’s program bearing his philosophy, the “vast wasteland” of American television had changed dramatically, with *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street* anchoring the new Public Broadcasting System, with a backbone and local broadcasting fees supported by the Congressionally-chartered Corporation for Public Broadcasting.<sup>4</sup> Until the rapid spread of cable television in the 1980s fragmented educational programming for young children, these two shows dominated informal education for preschoolers – what Larry Cremin called one of the two great “educative experiences” of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> They provided inspiration that television could be different from cartoons that advertised toys and sugary cereals.<sup>6</sup> For approximately two decades, television became the American experience with a national educational curriculum – one that was relatively uncontroversial, beloved by millions of children and their families, focused on young children, and delivered substantially by puppets.

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program officers had decided to fund primarily public-affairs programming leaving room for less than three hours per week of other freshly-produced programming.

<sup>3</sup> For Rogers’s unhappy time in Canada, see Maxwell King, *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* (Abrams Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the public-private funding of *Sesame Street*, see Dorn and Kim, “Budgeting for Big Bird,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the History of Education Society (November 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988), e.g., p. 644.

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Morrow, *“Sesame Street” and the Reform of Children’s Television* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

The rise of national educational broadcasting for preschoolers thus reflected a highly-contingent sequence of events, involving the commitment of professionals working at the birth of local public television, the development of relationships between television professionals and child development researchers, and public-private funding. In the early and mid-1960s, television programming for young children comprised a few nationally-broadcast or franchised shows such as *Captain Kangaroo* and *Romper Room* as well as occasional (short-lived) evening cartoons and the Saturday morning block of shows targeting children as a demographic segment. In addition, while television was available in most private homes, families generally owned one television set, and children thus watched a great deal of adult programming. This mixing of ages in front of the television was behind a key concern of Newton Minow when he called television a “vast wasteland” in his spring 1961 speech to broadcasters:

Most young children today spend as much time watching television as they do in the schoolroom. It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school, and church. Today, there is a fourth great influence, and you ladies and gentlemen in this room control it.<sup>7</sup>

In the span of years when Fred Rogers moved from Pittsburgh to Toronto, the Federal Communications Commission chair had officially declared that children were vulnerable to programs on television crafted far from their interests.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Newton Minow -- Address to the National Association of Broadcasters (Television and the Public Interest),” accessed December 20, 2019, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Castillo describes the series of postwar moral panics over youth and media in her dissertation, “A Comparative Historical Analysis of Post-War Moral Panics and the Construction of Youth from 1938 to 2010” (University of South Florida, 2011), <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3025>. The 1950s moral panic over crime comics, and the Kefauver hearings, are covered by James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

Also in the 1960s, federal officials were debating what it could do to reshape the opportunities of poor children. In the wake of Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, and growing conflict over desegregation of schools and public accommodations in the South, the debate leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 included educational opportunity as a core component. The Civil Rights Act required a study of equal educational opportunity, what became known popularly as the Coleman Report of 1966, and the Equal Opportunity Act of 1964 created Head Start as a pre-school program funded by the federal government. In 1965, the Urban Child Center at the University of Chicago argued for an explicit pre-academic curriculum for the new program.<sup>9</sup> David Weikart was funded by the federal government to write a white paper about preschool education. In January 1967, Weikart suggested a program where “the primary goals are intellectual and language development... with sequenced presentations of teacher-planned activities.”<sup>10</sup> In this context, it is not a surprise that television was *potentially* seen as an educational tool.<sup>11</sup> Some key-educational broadcasting programs, like *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, were explicitly planned for teaching preschool children.

### **The Birth of Public Educational Broadcasting for Preschoolers**

As public television producers in Pittsburgh and New York, respectively, Fred Rogers and Joan Ganz Cooney took separate paths to creating iconic educational programming by the end of the 1960s. Rogers ended up creating a tightly-controlled program, and his path was both personal and deliberately diverging from trends in commercial television. After his graduation

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<sup>9</sup> Robert W. Morrow, “*Sesame Street*” and the Reform of Children’s Television (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Maris Vinovskis, *The Birth of Head Start: Preschool Education Policies in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.114.

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Morrow, “*Sesame Street*” and the Reform of Children’s Television (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

from Rollins College, Rogers worked for NBC in New York for two years before becoming one of the first employees at Pittsburgh's WQED, partnering with Josie Carey to create *The Children's Corner*. It was in that show that he first worked with puppets on television, although primarily as entertainment. He established a professional relationship with the CBC's Fred Rainsberry starting in 1956,<sup>12</sup> about the same time that he began a masters of divinity program, in which he specialized in children's issues and began working with child development researcher Margaret McFarland.<sup>13</sup>

Rogers's views about television were shaped by several sources: by his interaction with Canadian children's program producers and supervisors (especially Rainsberry), by his divinity program, where he specialized in children's issues and conducted independent studies with Margaret McFarland, director of the Arsenal Family and Children's Center, and by his own interactions with children in answering letters to him and Josie Carey and in his visiting schools and preschool centers. After become frustrated with repeated denials of proposals to create children's shows in the United States, Rogers finally left the United States so he could create his own show. Only after returning to Pittsburgh and produced a second iteration of *Misterogers* on a commercial Pittsburgh station did Rogers create an American noncommercial version that was shown in a short season in 1966-67 to a handful of local stations and then, with funding from Sears Roebuck Foundation and National Educational Television, a much larger swath of public television starting in fall 1967.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of their early correspondence, see Rainsberry's invitation to host Carey and Rogers in Toronto; Fred B. Rainsberry to Rogers and Carey, April 17, 1956, EU 49, Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College. Rainsberry discusses his strategic interest in Rogers in F. B Rainsberry, *A History of Children's Television in English Canada, 1952-1986* (Scarecrow Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> A concrete example of their work, in addition to McFarland's script consulting, was an unpublished manuscript on puppetry and childhood; Fred M. Rogers and Margaret Beall McFarland, "Puppet Play: A Creative Approach to Growth Tasks" (n.d.), EU48, Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College.

<sup>14</sup> King, *The Good Neighbor*.

Joan Ganz Cooney became the first head of the Children's Television Workshop, a sprawling enterprise that gave considerable freedom to its creative talent and deliberately borrowed prevailing commercial patterns in television. After working as an assistant editor at the *Arizona Republic* in the early 1950s, Cooney became a documentary producer for New York's public television station, in which she produced a film on an experimental preschool operated by Martin and Cynthia Deutsch – one of the local programs that helped inspire Head Start.<sup>15</sup> The origin story often retold for *Sesame Street* by Cooney and others usually begins at a mid-60s dinner party at Cooney's house with Lloyd Morrisett, a vice president at the Carnegie Corporations, and also Lewis Freedman, Cooney's boss at New York City's public television station. Morrisett's daughter was addicted to watching television, he reported, and wondered, could television do anything productive for children? That sparked an intense effort to answer that question. The hope that threaded through the proposals that followed: a show that “would be entertaining and attractive to the children and, at the same time, educational.” Through multiple proposals, including one that New York's station management rejected, Cooney and Morrisett stitched together \$8 million in public and private grants to create the Children's Television Workshop. The Workshop created a strong relationship with a group of child development researchers, as well as adopting behaviorist research methods that paralleled market research already known in television, and first broadcasting in November 1969.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Zigler and Sally J. Styfco, *The Hidden History of Head Start* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> Morrow, “*Sesame Street*” and the Reform of Children's Television, p. 47. The structure of the Workshop's relationship with child researchers came directly from a suggestion by historian Larry Cremin; Joan Ganz Cooney to Cremin, March 18, 1968, Box 32, Folder 35, Archive of the Children's Television Workshop, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries.

## The Televised National Curriculum

There was no documented “national curriculum” by the federal government in educational programs such as *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. However, initial plans and effectively structured programs were carried nationally to all children in the United States, and these programs have been telecast with the goal of developing intellectual and cultural development for all. The country thus had an implicit national curriculum, and that curriculum deserves some attention, starting with the underlying assumptions of the programs’ creators. Most critically, the multiple proposals for educational broadcasting programs in the 1960s assumed that television already was ubiquitous. Thus educational broadcasting programs were not the only other “schoolroom” for preschool education—something Minow had highlighted.<sup>17</sup> Rather, these programs would have to compete for attention (for *Sesame Street*) or be so different in nature it could bring recognition (for *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*) – and thus the alternative to commercial children’s television would have to be crafted, deliberately educational, “a wall-less, nationwide nursery school.”<sup>18</sup>

What was planned for this implicit national preschool curriculum? There is little available about what Rogers said explicitly about the designs for *Misterogers* when he began work in Toronto. But there is a great deal for *Sesame Street*, from the various papers written by Cooney both to frame the ideas for a educational show aimed at preschoolers and then to solicit funding. In a proposal to New York City’s public television station in 1966, Cooney focused on the need “to foster intellectual and cultural development in preschoolers” defined by preschool educators and psychologists. To achieve this, she proposed that television could teach children about issues

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<sup>17</sup> Sherman Dorn and Woeyong Kim, “Budgeting for Big Bird.”

<sup>18</sup> Cooney and Gottlieb, “Television for Preschool Children,” p. 52.

such as language, shapes, time, classification of objects, basic numeracy, and cause-and-effect relationships, as well as labels for emotions.<sup>19</sup>

To make a common curriculum for television shows, Cooney proposed several segments that should be included in making educational programs. First, she proposed that the children's program have to teach language skills and reasoning skills through story reading. The children's program should have a goal to increase children's vocabulary to help their reasoning skills. Second, she believed that programs should develop language by introducing letters and numbers by using animation. Third, a show could develop logical thinking through segments such as a picture game, where children could participate in activities focused on logical classification. And lastly, she focused on science and nature. By watching demonstrations on camera, children could see the actual process of scientific experiments.<sup>20</sup> The station's managers turned down the proposal, and Cooney worked with Lloyd Morrisett and others to find funding that eventually came through in spring 1968.<sup>21</sup>

Cooney's revised proposal in 1968 with Linda Gottlieb emphasized the accessibility of educational programs for poor children. She argued that the existing shows such as "Captain Kangaroo" and "Romper Room" were not fully educational programs. Thus, this proposal suggested more specific goals to make educational shows, and that these goals also should be organized by an advisory board composed of psychologists and teachers. The recommended topics overlapped with Cooney's earlier proposal:

1. Recognition of numbers one through ten and simple counting ability.

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<sup>19</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney, "A Proposal for the Use of Television in Preschool Education" (1966), Box 1, Folder 2, Archive of the Children's Television Workshop, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup>Joan Ganz Cooney, "A Proposal for the Use of Television in Preschool Education," pp. 8-11.

<sup>21</sup> Morrow, "*Sesame Street*" and the Reform of Children's Television.

2. Recognition of letters of the alphabet and the sounds most commonly associated with them: in effect the first steps in learning to read.
3. Basic language skills (the ability to handle grammatical contrasts, to differentiate among prepositions, to speak in whole sentences, to express in clear language such ideas as how to get some place, or what happened today).
4. Concepts of space and time
5. Beginning logical concepts
6. Beginning mathematical concepts
7. The growth of reasoning skills (cause and effect, reasoning by association and inference)
8. Beginning awareness of basic emotions as a step toward mastering them.<sup>22</sup>

These initial proposals by Cooney and later Gottlieb commonly indicated that educational broadcasting programs for preschoolers would focus on basic literacy, knowledge, and cognitive skills related to intellectual and cultural development. For this, some general signs like “directed activity”, “general knowledge”, and “developing imagination” were expected for new educational programs. These objectives were intended to teach the way “how to think” for children not just to teach some information. In addition, these proposed both education and entertainment would be fulfilled as its primary aims.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney and Linda Gottlieb, “Television for Preschool Children: A Proposal” (February 19, 1968), Box 1, Folder 3, Archive of the Children’s Television Workshop, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Cooney, “The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education;” Cooney and Gottlieb, “Television for Preschool Children,” p. 12.

## Similarities

Despite the different paths leading to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street*, there were some important similarities in both their origins and approaches to young children's educational programming. Behind the scenes, both shows were involved longstanding professional relationships with professional researchers – a single researcher for Fred Rogers, and a group of advisors and consultants for the Children's Television Workshop. In both cases, this led to deliberate planning of themes that could be considered curriculum-like, both season-long plans on *Sesame Street* and weeklong themes for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.<sup>24</sup> On camera, the authority of both shows were rooted in adults shown on camera in positions of responsibility rather than entertainment – Fred Rogers as himself, and the adult characters such as Gordon, Susan, Bob, and Mr. Hooper in *Sesame Street*. Neither show mirrored the format of schooling, unlike *Ding-Dong School* or *Romper Room*. Both shows had puppets in significant roles, in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and interacting directly with the human characters in *Sesame Street*. Both shows had significant roles for music on the show, not only through guests such as Yo-Yo Ma or Tony Bennett but also with skilled performers on staff for Fred Rogers and composers for Children's Television Workshop.

Part of the reason for the similarities was in the production history of early television in the United States: Live music performance was one of the staples of early television shows, and so musical performances on a children's show such as *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was an extension of existing practices. Puppets had become a significant part of early live children's television shows, from Bob Keeshan's *Captain Kangaroo* (with Bunny Rabbit as a puppet

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<sup>24</sup> Rogers had taken a multi-year hiatus in the mid-1970s; the weekly themes were a feature of the show after he restarted production in 1979; for details of the hiatus see King, *The Good Neighbor*.

character) to *The Shari Lewis Show* (Lamb Chop). But some of the similarities came out of the late-1960s era in which the two shows began, including the use of researchers as consultants for each show. In the years after Head Start was inspired by researcher-developed early-childhood interventions, it was a reasonable step for educational television shows to have some connection with research. Rogers' regular script consultant Margaret McFarland was the director of a University of Pittsburgh community family counseling center, the Arsenal Family and Children's Center, founded with Benjamin Spock and Erik Erikson in the early 1950s.<sup>25</sup> The Children's Television Workshop had a much larger set of researchers with whom to work, as primary advisor Gerald Lesser could recruit notable researchers such as Chester Pierce and Jeanne Chall.<sup>26</sup>

A second way in which *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* reflected the era of their origins was in modeling integrated race relations in their early seasons, if in a soft-pedaled way for children's programs. *Sesame Street's* first season had an interracial human cast, with the humans living in the same neighborhood, talking about their jobs, and serving as role models for the Muppet characters and the children appearing in the live-action segments of the show.<sup>27</sup> Fred Rogers invited local opera singer Francois Clemmons to be a regular actor on the

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<sup>25</sup> "M.B. McFarland, 83, A Child Psychologist," *The New York Times*, September 14, 1988, sec. Obituaries, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/14/obituaries/mb-mcfarland-83-a-child-psychologist.html>.

<sup>26</sup> As Morrow points out, it helped the researchers' credibility with *Sesame Street* production staff that the in-house research head for Children's Television Workshop used a behaviorist technique for gauging young viewers' attention in a way that looked like an advance version of television audience research.

<sup>27</sup> Mississippi's state education television network refused to broadcast the first season of the show – something unique in the South, and probably related less to the integrated cast than the contemporary controversy over the FCC's pulling of a commercial Jackson station's license; Kay Mills, *Changing Channels: The Civil Rights Case That Transformed Television* (University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

show, and the 1969 episode where they share a kiddie pool was a subtle but explicit response by Rogers to resistance to desegregation of public facilities (including public swimming pools).<sup>28</sup>

## Differences

The clearest structural difference between the two shows were in the focus of each show's educational purpose. For *Sesame Street*, the early seasons focused explicitly on pre-academic skills that the show's advisors and consultants had decided was important for preschoolers to learn: letter and number recognition, letter-sound relationships, and the like. This focus had come out of a series of five structured conversations in summer 1968, and while there were topics on other issues (social, moral, and affective development; reasoning and problem-solving; and perception), the early show became (accurately) well-known for the pre-academic focus.<sup>29</sup>

Two decades into the production of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Fred Rogers said that he had designed his show in much more general purposes: "We wanted to offer somebody on television who would be a neighbor, who showed that childhood was important, and consequently children have value." Longtime writer and associate producer Hedda Sharapan

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Clemmons' telling of the story in "StoryCorps 462: In the Neighborhood," accessed December 21, 2019, <https://storycorps.org/podcast/storycorps-462-in-the-neighborhood/>, and in Morgan Neville, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (Universal, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Morrow, "*Sesame Street*" and *the Reform of Children's Television*; also see the individual seminar reports: Barbara Carter and Gloria Dapper, "Report of Seminar I: Social, Moral and Affective Development" (Cambridge, MA: Children's Television Workshop, June 26, 1968), Box 32, Folder 38, Archive of the Children's Television Workshop, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries; Carter and Dapper, "Report of Seminar II: Language and Reading" (New York, NY: Children's Television Workshop, July 8, 1968), Box 32, Folder 39; Carter and Dapper, "Report of Seminar III: Mathematical and Numerical Skills" (New York, NY: Children's Television Workshop, July 15, 1968), Box 32, Folder 40; Carter and Dapper, "Report of Seminar IV: Reasoning and Problem Solving" (Cambridge, MA: Children's Television Workshop, July 24, 1968), Box 32, Folder 41; Caroline Hightower, "Report of Seminar V: Perception" (New York, NY: Children's Television Workshop, August 21, 1968), Box 32, Folder 42. Part of the relative influence may have been the quality of discussion—the first seminar's topic overlapped heavily with the focus of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, but the practical advice was less creative and less practical than the recommendations that flowed from other seminars.

explained in more concrete terms, that the show's purpose was in helping "children deal with their everyday concerns and feelings, and maybe the bottom line of that is helping children feel good about who they are."<sup>30</sup> The typical pattern of the show divided the half-hour program into framing segments showing Fred Rogers in his "home," often speaking directly to camera about issues with children as the intended audience, with a middle imaginary segment in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where puppets interacted with human actors to illustrate a theme of the show, such as how to respond to feelings like anger or sadness. As Sharapan explained, the show in the late 1980s and 1990s used weekly themes to address "today's questions like divorce and day-care, and 'When Parents Go to Work' is our newest week, but what's interesting is that these really have to do with the basic child development concerns of separation and loss, and ... we're still talking about reassurance that you're loved and that you're cared about."<sup>31</sup>

These differences were in the realm of formal structures, core assumptions about what the shows should teach that were visible in the topics covered and the ways in which each show attempted to teach important concepts to children. For viewers of *Sesame Street*, they and their families knew that the show would introduce letters, numbers, shapes, and colors using segments such as the Muppet character Lefty trying to sell the letter O to Ernie, or the Count taking glee in attaching numbers to everything he could. Preschoolers watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*

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<sup>30</sup> Lucille Burbank, "Children's Television: An Historical Inquiry on Three Selected, Prominent, Long-Running, Early Childhood TV Programs" (Ed.D., Temple University, 1992), <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/304025522/abstract/3AC4A4852C044EFEPQ/1>, pp. 139, 140. As a longtime consultant and employee in Children's Television Workshop, Burbank had extensive industry connections and could conduct interviews with key personnel in both programs as well as *Captain Kangaroo*. Unfortunately, she did not record the interviews, and the accuracy of the quotations here are reliant on her notetaking skills while conducting personal or telephone interviews. We are using quotations that are consistent with and corroborate other accounts of the show's history.

<sup>31</sup> Burbank, "Children's Television," p. 144.

would not learn pre-academic skills from the show, but they might watch Fred Rogers discover that one of his fish in the on-set fish tank was dead, see him bury it, and hear Rogers explain what death is and how one can handle being sad after a pet dies.<sup>32</sup> That delineation is not absolute; many episodes on *Sesame Street* have addressed topics we might consider part of social and emotional learning, such as when Big Bird learned about death through the death of Mr. Hooper, and Fred Rogers often recorded video on location or invited guests on the show to demonstrate some topic didactically, such as how crayons are made.<sup>33</sup> But on the whole, the explicit core of each show was consistent between what the creators explained (as described above) and what the audience experienced. One might call these the formal curriculum elements of each show.

Below those formal elements lay deeper philosophical differences on the use of television and the implicit relationship between the creators of an educational television program and its intended audience. Built into *Sesame Street*'s DNA from the beginning was adaptation to existing television repertoires, from the time spent gauging whether recorded video segments would keep the attention of young children to the jump cuts between video segments and even the parodies of television commercial motifs. Joan Ganz Cooney intended that the experimental show would meet success only if it met the goals of both audience share and educational impact. She hired senior staff who had worked on *Captain Kangaroo*, and she had no qualms about flattering commercial television's success with a show that *could* be a success on a regular network, but would be shown on public television. In contrast, Fred Rogers crafted a show that was entirely unlike everything he despised about commercial television: slower-paced, carefully

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<sup>32</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* episode 1101, originally aired March 23, 1970.

<sup>33</sup> *Sesame Street*, season 15, episode 4, originally aired November 24, 1983; *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* episode 1481, originally aired June 1, 1981.

crafted to speak truthfully and never mix reality with fantasy.<sup>34</sup> The leaders and crews for the two shows respected each other enormously – Rogers was originally scheduled to attend one of the summer 1968 discussions of what to teach on *Sesame Street* – but certainly had different assumptions about what represented the best of children’s television.

Importantly, Rogers was not alone in his criticism of the modal form of television programming for children, and the development of his philosophy of children’s programming reflected two important sources. One was his relationship with Margaret McFarland, as noted earlier. The second was his long relationship early in his career with the supervisor of children’s programs for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Fred Rainsberry. Like Rogers, Rainsberry was also unimpressed with fast-paced programming. In his report to the Educational Television and Radio Center giving feedback on a proposal for a children’s television “magazine” show, Rainsberry specifically commented on a proposed format to mirror the *Mickey Mouse Club*: “[Y]ou will notice that [Disney producers] depend a great deal upon a rapid pace of movement and at one which has the consistency of adult, rather than children’s entertainment, e.g. a perennial mouseketeer dance and roll call.”<sup>35</sup> Rainsberry invited Rogers to participate in several national conferences hosted by the CBC for Canadian children’s television producers, and his personal notes from the 1960 conference presage much of the tenor of *Mister Rogers’*

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<sup>34</sup> The crossover appearances of Fred Rogers and Carroll Spinney (as Big Bird) in spring 1981 are perhaps a good case in point of this difference, as observers have pointed out. Fred Rogers appeared on *Sesame Street* interacting with Spinney’s Big Bird character in the typical reality-fantasy mix for that show. But in negotiating the reciprocal appearance of Big Bird, Spinney reportedly refused to appear as himself and show how the Big Bird puppet worked. As a consequence, Rogers allegedly kept Big Bird in the scenes of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and showed himself in a giraffe outfit that he then took off to explain the difference between puppetry and reality. “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” Muppet Wiki, [https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Mister\\_Rogers%27\\_Neighborhood](https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Mister_Rogers%27_Neighborhood); “Sesame Street - The Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood Archive,” [http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/misc/sesame\\_street/index.html](http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/misc/sesame_street/index.html).

<sup>35</sup> Fred B. Rainsberry, “E.T.R.C. Plan for Children’s Programs,” n.d., p. 2, attached to Rainsberry to Rogers, December 23, 1958, EU 49, Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College.

*Neighborhood* as it was produced later in the decade. Rogers received the clear message from discussion at the conference that children's programming appealed to different needs:

Children are curious: hungry for adventure—not like many adults who are escapists.

Escapism is not normal pattern for child.<sup>36</sup>

Later, Rogers starred his notes about the extent to which a program could alarm a young child:

No tension-producing situations

Manageable situations are what we need

Tension itself is much worse than guns.<sup>37</sup>

On the last half-page of notes, Rogers presaged the importance of addressing children's emotions in hard circumstances: "I wonder if there might not be certain phases of life which the family might handle better than we," and in the line below Rogers wrote simply, "death."<sup>38</sup> Having time to spend with Canadian broadcasters gave Rogers experience with a different way of thinking about children's programming, at the same time that he was studying divinity and being frustrated by the American public television community.

One of the underlying differences were also the dramatically different resources available to the shows. Rogers had modest support from the Sears Roebuck Foundation and the public television community. The Children's Television Workshop started with \$8 million in grants, and then expanded revenues with consumer goods and international broadcast fees. Those differences sometimes became reflected in internal communications. For example, as both shows attempted to produce and sell consumer products in the early 1970s, Rogers's staff member Eliot

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<sup>36</sup> Fred M. Rogers, "Fred Rogers Personal Notes from May 1960 CBC Children's Programming Conference," May 1960, EU52, "Conference, CBC children's programming, Feb. 1959" folder, Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College, p. 1; emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> "Fred Rogers Personal Notes," p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Fred Rogers Personal Notes," p. 4.

Daley revealed the common assumptions in his impressionistic market analysis in 1974. Daley labeled the Workshop and *Sesame Street* as “enormously well-known, clever, aggressive” in contrast with *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* which he described as “sophisticated, low-key and personal.”<sup>39</sup> Daley described two conversations with the Playskool senior vice president for new-product development, who at first had never heard of Fred Rogers. The following week, when they talked, the Playskool executive reported that his five-year-old granddaughter “worships” Mr. Rogers, but that he would invest Playskool’s resources in *Sesame Street* merchandise. Daley described the sentiments of the toy-company executive as follows: Fred Rogers is “not my type at all. Nor, (drawing now upon my twenty years in this business) I daresay, is he the type who will set cash registers a-jingling across the land.”<sup>40</sup> In his summarizing his somewhat pessimistic view, Daley framed the merchandising of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* explicitly against *Sesame Street*:

We will never outsell "Sesame Street," because we will never become so aggressively well-known as they are -- and recognition is the precondition of response. But a serviceable and worthwhile representation of our materials still seems viable, "Sesame Street" and their fortunes notwithstanding.<sup>41</sup>

It must have been difficult to be the small production company with an independent vision, striking out against the grain of American commercial television, and however well-loved *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was, those who worked for Fred Rogers knew that his vision for

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<sup>39</sup> Eliot Daley, “Marketplace Comparison of ‘Sesame Street’ and ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,’” January 3, 1974, EU1, “Eliot, Dale” folder, Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Daley, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Daley, p. 8.

children's programming had fewer resources than *Sesame Street*, and in contrast Children's Television Workshop (now Sesame Workshop) looked like a giant.

### **Television and Curriculum Politics**

There is a hole in the postwar historiography of American education where radio and television should appear. Despite the commonplace acknowledgment that television was a growing part of American life after World War II, such as Cremin's (1988) inclusion of television in his constellation of "educative experiences," historians of education have not effectively incorporated that experience into the broader discussion of postwar education. While federal policy is inherently tied to broadcasting, for example, histories of federal education policy commonly omit broadcasting. This omission extends to histories of education research; Lagemann's history of research in education ignores the relationships among child development research, formative research, and television production in the origins of *Sesame Street*. In part, this omission may come from the common classification of broadcasting as part of the history of educational technology and instructional media, such as one finds with Cuban, Reiser, and Saettler. Cuban's thesis frames the pedagogically-conservative use of media and other technologies as happening *within* existing school structures. We can repair this hole by understanding educational broadcasting as an interaction of longer-term debates over childhood and youth (and education more broadly) with the technology politics of broadcasting. The emergence of a unique educational politics in broadcasting flowed from the interaction of the broadcast policy environment with older debates about how education should prepare citizens. This debate often focused on the relationship between the public interest and public-affairs broadcasting; the need for FCC license-holders to demonstrate that they satisfied the public interest drove the creation of news and public-affairs programming on commercial networks. But

those debates also flowed through concerns about children's programming that seemed like its purpose was to teach children how to buy toys and cereal.<sup>42</sup>

While the appearance of *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* appeared to remedy an important flaw in children's programming, we can look at the two programs in addition through the lens of curriculum history. The evolution of broadcast curriculum has had politics different from those of K-12 schooling: there has been no equivalent of local and state boards in the way that postwar educational politics in elementary and secondary schools have evolved with complicated local politics.<sup>43</sup> And it is at that philosophical level where the two preschool shows reflect deeper philosophical disagreements in the postwar era about the education of young children. Should preschool education emphasize some essential qualities of childhood that are respected as a *sine qua non*, including the chance to play, grow up, experience emotions, and develop fully as human beings? That developmentalist philosophy aligns with the slower-paced, non-academic approach of Fred Rogers throughout the production of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Or should preschool education address the academic gap that poor children faced when entering primary grades, ensuring that children nationwide would have a

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<sup>42</sup> Cremin, *American Education*; Carl Kaestle and Alyssa E. Lodewick, eds., *To Educate a Nation : Federal and National Strategies of School Reform* (University Press of Kansas, 2007); Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Larry Cuban, *Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology Since 1920* (Teachers College Press, 1986); Robert A. Reiser, "A History of Instructional Design and Technology: Part I: A History of Instructional Media," *Educational Technology Research and Development* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 53-64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02504506>; Paul Saettler, *The Evolution of American Educational Technology* (Information Age Publishing, 2004); Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (Rutgers University Press, 1995); Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is: A History of Television News in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Campbell F. Scribner, *The Fight for Local Control: Schools, Suburbs, and American Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

fair start at academic success? That way lay the core purpose of *Sesame Street*, to demonstrate and then fulfill the promise of education to teach—meaning in at least an academic sense.<sup>44</sup>

For millions of American households with small children, these differences were less meaningful than a deeper choice families have faced since the spread of television: whom did you trust your children to watch? Newton Minow's jeremiad in 1961 was followed by the creation of Action for Children's Television and pressure for regulation of commercial children's television, which eventually ended in a required number of educational hours by all broadcast channels.<sup>45</sup> In this environment, and repeated moral panics about media and children, both shows clearly met a fundamental threshold for trust. The social debates about the influences of television on children were broader than the philosophical debates over the education of young children. The more general public debates about television masked what otherwise might have been debates about the curriculum philosophy of two popular television shows for children.

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<sup>44</sup> Our thanks to Barbara Beatty for her comments along these lines at a forum on the history of *Sesame Street* at the 2019 annual meeting of the History of Education Society.

<sup>45</sup> Television was also one of the factors blamed for a secular decline in SAT scores between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s; College Entrance Examination Board Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline, *On Further Examination: Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline* (College Entrance Examination Board, 1977).