

Bridging the gaps? Sesame Street, ‘race’ and educational disadvantage

David Buckingham

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Sesame Street is by far the longest-running children’s television programme ever made. Since its debut in 1969, more than 4400 episodes have been produced. The show has been broadcast in over 100 countries worldwide, and won countless awards. Yet its fiftieth year in 2019 was marked, not just by celebration, but also by controversy. It was announced that the following season, its fifty first, would have its first run exclusively on a new subscription-only streaming service, HBO Max, owned by WarnerMedia.¹ Furthermore, HBO Max would now become the exclusive channel for streaming of the show’s entire back catalogue. In fact, this deal was merely the latest development in a longer-term strategy. Although it was originally funded by grants from philanthropic foundations and from federal government, *Sesame Street* has always struggled to remain commercially viable. As the marketplace has become more competitive, and as cuts to public television have begun to bite, it has come to rely increasingly on merchandising and overseas sales. Corporate sponsorship of the show began in 1998, and after 45 years on free-to-air PBS channels, it first signed on with HBO’s premium cable channel in 2015.

Nevertheless, the latest announcement met with widespread dismay among commentators on social media. Some of this was perhaps a little exaggerated - new episodes continue to be aired on PBS, albeit nine months later than on HBO – and some of it was rather sentimental. Yet the apparent capitulation of *Sesame Street* to commercial forces – and the resulting exclusion of less affluent viewers – was somehow deeply symbolic. While the programme lives in popular memory as the original home of the Muppets, the controversy seemed to remind some critics of its original social and educational objectives. Some complained about the ‘gentrification’ of the Street, and saw the move as a kind of betrayal of its original mission to educate children from low-income families.² For many, and perhaps particularly for baby boomers, *Sesame Street* remains the motherhood and apple pie of children’s TV: it holds out the promise – perhaps the dream – of television as an agent of progressive social change.

Yet before *Sesame Street* finally settles into a nostalgic, rosy glow, it’s important to recall some of the controversy that surrounded its early days. In this essay, I want to go back to the origins of *Sesame Street* and the Children’s Television Workshop (since renamed Sesame Workshop), the non-profit organization that produced it. In particular, I want to probe the idea that is implicit in concerns about the ‘gentrification’ of the show. According to its promotional material, and the grant applications that secured its initial funding, *Sesame Street* was targeted at preschool children in general, but *particularly* at disadvantaged, inner-city children – and, while this was not always acknowledged in quite such explicit terms, at African-American

children specifically. This sense of the programme's social mission was apparent not just in the claims of its producers and researchers, but also in what appeared on screen, and in a range of outreach activities that sought to engage this specific target audience. And yet, as we'll see, this was a difficult – and at times, quite confused and contradictory – endeavour.

Success stories

Sesame Street is not just the longest-running children's show of all time: it is also the most extensively documented and researched, and quite possibly the most debated. The fiftieth anniversary saw a flurry of celebratory articles and TV specials; but there have been numerous books published about the show over the years, as well as countless book chapters and academic research studies (most of them funded by the Children's Television Workshop itself). At least some of this material blurs the line between evaluation and sheer public relations. Like Disney, CTW has been assiduous – and occasionally quite ferocious – in promoting the story of its own success.

The origins of *Sesame Street* lay in a New York dinner party conversation between two of its key founders – a setting which might itself be seen to reflect the privileged liberal social milieu from which it emerged. As Michael Davis puts it (somewhat romantically), these were individuals who came together 'at a star-crossed moment in American life when people of means who lived in comfort chose to dedicate their energies to the less fortunate and the forgotten, the rural poor and the underprivileged of the urban ghettos'.³ Joan Ganz Cooney was a former television publicist who had gone on to produce social issue documentary programmes for WNET, the New York public television channel: one of her most recent programmes had focused on a preschool reading initiative for African-American children in Harlem. The person whose interest she sparked was Lloyd Morrisett, an executive vice-president from the Carnegie Corporation, who played a key role in brokering the funding for the early seasons: Morrisett had recently noticed his young daughter's growing fascination for television, and for commercials in particular.

It was from Cooney and Morrisett's casual speculations about the educational potential of television that *Sesame Street* was born. At Morrisett's instigation, Cooney was invited by Carnegie to produce a scoping report on pre-school television, published in 1967, and then a feasibility study for what was to become *Sesame Street*. She went on to become the executive director of Children's Television Workshop, a position she held for twenty years.

For his part, Morrisett had to tackle scepticism within the Carnegie Foundation itself about the value of using such an expensive and apparently ephemeral medium such as television.⁴ Gaining the necessary funding entailed delicate negotiations with the federal government's Office of Education, and with other funders such as the Ford Foundation: it appears that the approval of Harold 'Doc' Howe, the Commissioner of the OE, was crucial in securing wider support. Yet public funding was only ever likely to be short-term; and in a competitive commercial environment, sustaining the future of CTW was bound to prove challenging. The budget for the start-up and the first season was in the region of \$8 million, over \$50 million in today's terms, and there were many who resented CTW's success in gaining such substantial funding.

Some argued that the money would have been better spent on more direct educational provision; others were doubtful about the value of television as an educational medium; while some commercial TV producers felt that the CTW had unfairly cornered the market.

As such, it's not surprising that CTW put a great deal of energy into promotion of various kinds. Influential support was forthcoming from sources as diverse as the *New York Times* TV critic Jack Gould and the child-care expert Dr. Benjamin Spock.⁵ However, the publicity wasn't confined to predictable media spin. The educational credibility of the show was a vital aspect of its brand. Gerald Lesser, a Harvard professor, was enlisted to chair CTW's Advisory Board, to devise the programme's 'curriculum' and oversee its research activities. The educational aims were developed through a series of seminars with a carefully selected group of academic experts alongside creative staff. These seminars were somewhat cynically described by John White of National Educational Television as a form of public relations, designed to deflect criticism: along with the early research, they gave the project 'the Good Housekeeping seal of approval before it hit the air'.⁶

Just a few years later, Lesser's own book *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street* extolled the 'personal genius' of Cooney and her staff, but it also proclaimed the merits of what has come to be known as the 'CTW Model'. This was partly about the combination of education and entertainment – although, as we'll see, both of these were defined in quite particular ways. However, it was also about the collaboration between creative producers and academics: Lesser himself was just one of the many high-profile scholars whom CTW brought on board (and paid) to provide legitimacy as well as input and advice. Research was also a vital part of the 'model'. At an early stage, CTW established its own research department (under the direction of another academic, Edward Palmer), which conducted formative studies designed to assess the appeal and effectiveness of specific programme formats and components. It is this research that forms the basis for Lesser's general account of what 'works' in educational television (for example, in terms of attracting and directing children's attention, combining verbal and visual elements, modelling learning, and so on). It also engaged an external evaluation agency, the Educational Testing Service, to conduct a summative evaluation of the achievements of its early seasons. This kind of research was obviously vital in securing continuing funding – although, as we'll see, the ETS research was subjected to considerable criticism, in a debate that revealed some of the confusion of CTW's original aims.

Controversy

Despite this considerable promotional effort, *Sesame Street* was bound to be controversial. Even before the show went on air, it was attracting a range of negative commentary. In early press reports, it was variously described as repetitive, disjointed, hypnotic, and 'psychically damaging'. Among many other things, it was accused of bombarding children and producing 'sensory overload'; causing frantic, hyperactive behaviour; undermining children's reading and study habits; emphasizing mechanical rote learning; and provoking aggression, by encouraging children to identify with 'monsters' (that is, the Muppets). A psychiatrist called to give evidence by a Senate Subcommittee claimed that the programme would create a generation of

drug addicts; while a pre-school specialist likened its form of thought control to Huxley's *Brave New World*.⁷ Irrespective of their merits, such criticisms routinely attract attention in rival media, and provide a useful means of self-promotion for those with other axes to grind.

While some of the criticism was obviously overstated, however, much of it was clearly driven by wider social and educational concerns. Thus, some conservatives accused *Sesame Street* of undermining traditional childhood values and teaching poor quality 'street' language; while some radicals condemned what they saw as its sanitized image of inner-city life, its use of rapid paced, hard-sell advertising formats, and its 'behaviourist' approach to teaching. Critics on both sides accused it of wasting taxpayers' money.⁸ In different ways, both groups were informed by a more general disdain for television as a medium *per se*, and by some rather grandiose assumptions about its effects. Cooney and her colleagues largely dismissed such arguments as a form of snobbery: 'for all these upper-middle-class, largely middle-class people, to wring their hands about television and about fast pace... is really a very cheap shot', she later argued.⁹

I'll consider some of the more relevant and thoughtful of these criticisms in more detail in due course. In some instances, CTW was able to brush them off, but some of the more serious criticisms were treated very aggressively. For example, when the head of the BBC's children's department circulated a paper justifying her refusal to buy the show for screening on British television, CTW accused her of 'falsehoods and fabrications', and forced her to issue a substantial retraction.¹⁰ However, as we'll see, it was evidence from independent research – and a critical re-analysis of CTW's own funded studies – that led to the most vigorous counter-attacks, especially from Lesser and from CTW's head of research, Edward Palmer. Here, and in their response to the BBC, it was the claim that *Sesame Street* was trying – and failing – in its key aim to narrow the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children that proved to be particularly contentious. This is the issue that is the main focus of my attention in this essay.

Sesame Street in context

This was the sixties, and every night you would turn your television set on and the news would tell you cities were burning, leaders were being assassinated, riots were being held at universities, anti-war riots. And so it was as if people were saying, 'so do something!' to the television set. And one day they turned it on and television did something!

Joan Ganz Cooney, interviewed in 2006.¹¹

Sesame Street can be seen as the product of a particular historical conjuncture – a coming together of broader social, cultural and political developments. Simply as a television show, and particularly as a *children's* television show, it was extraordinarily innovative. Yet it was its social and educational aims that also broke new ground. The show explicitly set out to address what were seen as the educational needs of disadvantaged, inner-city children – and at least in its early seasons, this focused specifically on African-American children. As we'll see, it did this in two main ways:

firstly, through its representation of inner-city life, and of racial diversity; and secondly, through attempting to raise the educational achievement of black children in particular. As Benjamin Looker aptly puts it, the show was ‘a curious combination of social program and social representation, designed to educate and uplift inner-city audiences even as it depicted them’.¹² These two related issues will be addressed in detail in the sections that follow. However, it is important to begin by placing these aims within the wider historical context.

Sesame Street as television

At the beginning of the 1960s, Newton F. Minow, the incoming chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (the US regulatory body), had given a high-profile speech in which he famously described television as ‘a vast wasteland’.¹³ Minow did refer to the ‘special needs’ of children, and described children’s television as ‘massive doses of cartoons, violence, and more violence’; although his broader argument was about the need for television to function in the ‘public interest’, rather than merely serve commercial objectives. Through the 1960s, the ‘wasteland’ epithet became a staple of television criticism, but to many it seemed particularly applicable to children’s programming. Concerns around the harmful influence of television on children were growing, although it was not until later in the decade, with the formation of Action for Children’s Television in 1968, that these developed into a more organised campaign of activism.¹⁴

While some innovative animation shows had emerged in the early 1960s – the work of Hanna-Barbera is still under-appreciated – these tended to be based on adult sitcoms, and were partly targeted at a family audience. Programmes primarily for children were mostly to be found on Saturday mornings, when other, more lucrative audiences were assumed to be unavailable to view. The most common format was the live studio variety show, in which male hosts would entertain audiences with slapstick comedy, sketches and songs, alongside a cast of puppets and other performers. Probably the best known of these was *Howdy Doody*, which ran from 1947 until 1960; although others, such as the frenetic *Lunch with Soupy Sales*, lasted well into the 1960s and beyond. The hosts of such shows typically improvised much of their patter; while they delivered occasional pro-social homilies about tolerance or health and safety, they would also frequently interrupt to provide commercial messages (‘host selling’ of this kind was not banned until 1973). These shows were extremely cheap to produce, requiring only small production teams, and little rehearsal or preparation.

When it came to preschool children – the primary target of *Sesame Street* – there was even less available. *Captain Kangaroo*, featuring Bob Keeshan, began life in 1955 and ran until 1984; while the magazine format *Romper Room* lasted (astonishingly) from 1953 to 1994. Perhaps the most fondly remembered preschool show, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, did not make its national debut until 1968. Although several of its executive producers were poached from *Captain Kangaroo* (or had formerly worked on the show)¹⁵, *Sesame Street* was attempting something distinctly new – not least by virtue of its lavish funding and its high production values. Like its predecessors, the show featured adult hosts interacting with puppet characters – although the cast was significantly larger and more diverse. However, these elements

were interspersed with short animations, live-action documentary sequences and short films, mostly with a much more explicit teaching function.

If *Sesame Street* was unprecedented in children's television, it did nevertheless draw on television culture more widely. Cooney's initial feasibility study had proposed using a magazine format, but she later picked up the idea of using the methods of television commercials (such as repetition, animation and musical jingles) to 'sell' educational messages, such as letters and numbers.¹⁶ While these segments were a relatively small element of the show, the approach was controversial, particularly for critics of commercial television – as indeed was the broader intention to combine 'education' with 'entertainment' in the first place.

Meanwhile, early formative testing had suggested that the conventional format of adult hosts and children interacting on the studio set was one of the least appealing elements; and this encouraged the producers to import Jim and Jane Henson's Muppet characters, which they had been developing (and using in commercials) since the mid-1950s. Cooney and her colleagues realized that the show was more likely to attract an audience – and perhaps to achieve its educational aims – if it was appealing to adults as well. One often-cited influence here was *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, a fast-moving, kooky sketch-based comedy show that had debuted in early 1968. *Laugh-In* was an adult programme, featuring some satirical humour alongside more traditional slapstick and running gags; and in some respects, it reflected the emerging 'hip' style of the counter-culture, which was also evident in several of the Muppet characters. Nevertheless, there was some evidence that it was attracting a much younger audience, which was a particular inspiration for Cooney¹⁷: she later described *Sesame Street* as 'a *Laugh-In* for kids'.¹⁸

Sesame Street as education

President Lyndon Johnson is mainly remembered by non-Americans of my generation as the aggressive perpetrator of the Vietnam War. However, his presidency was also marked by a set of domestic social policy initiatives collectively known as the 'Great Society'. These measures – in areas such as health care, housing and education – were presented as means of addressing the problems, not only of poverty in general, but specifically of racial inequality and injustice. As in many other areas, Johnson was belatedly responding to the growing pressure of the Civil Rights movement. While the aspirations of the Great Society were bold, its concrete achievements were limited; but as Benjamin Looker suggests, it also provided the context for a new contemporary cultural style – a kind of hip, white liberal response to African-American forms of expression that were becoming steadily more assertive.

Education was a key element of the Great Society initiative; and indeed LBJ was also described by some as 'the Education President'. One of its most noted federal projects was the Head Start preschool programme, which specifically targeted disadvantaged children (it became one of the early backers of CTW, via the government's Office of Economic Opportunity). However, in the context of CTW, education was understood in particular ways that reflected the changing ideologies of the time. During the early 1960s, a series of researchers had drawn attention to the

educational inequalities between black and white children: black children were perceived to be arriving in first grade already some years 'behind' their white, middle-class counterparts, and the problem only got worse as they continued through school.¹⁹ Several studies placed the blame for this situation, not on the shortcomings of the schools, but on the inadequate preparation provided by African-American parents. Following in the footsteps of sociologists such as Michael Harrington and Oscar Lewis, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's government report *The Negro Family: A National Case for Action* (published in 1965) painted a picture of black families as positively dysfunctional. Parents (often single mothers) were found to be lacking in the expertise and motivation to encourage their children to learn; their forms of language were restricted and ill-suited to intellectual thought; and there was a lack of positive male role models in particular. Unlike their white peers, children from such backgrounds were simply not being properly prepared for school.

These kinds of arguments are frequently seen to reflect a 'deficit model' – in effect, to judge such children and their parents in terms of what they lack, or fail to do. However, this issue was already controversial among researchers at the time: for example, there were many heated debates about the relationships between 'race' and intelligence, and about notions of linguistic 'deprivation'. In this, as in many other areas, CTW's own position was not always consistent. Gerald Lesser, for example, argued that the 'need' for such education was among inner-city children in particular: 'the suburban, middle-class kid [already] encounters at home many of the skills and concepts we hope to convey' – while by contrast, 'urban' kids 'grow up with a very constricted view'.²⁰ Yet elsewhere, he explicitly rejected the idea that CTW operated according to such a deficit model.²¹ As we'll see, there was a conscious attempt to provide 'positive images' of black, inner city families; although for some commentators, this too was problematic. Even so, Lesser and others clearly shared the view that the problem was essentially a psychological rather than a social one: whatever the causes, it was manifested in a lack of cognitive or intellectual skills, and it was this that needed to be addressed.

If the explanation for disadvantage was debatable, therefore, there was rather less contention as to what should be done about it. As incoming president Richard Nixon put it, in a key speech to Congress in February 1969, poorer children were 'seriously deficient in the ability to profit from formal education'; yet the solution was to adjust the child to education, rather than education to the child. Pre-school education appeared to offer a potential way out of the generational 'cycle of poverty', although again it was a particular *kind* of pre-school education that was called for.

Cooney's initial report for the Carnegie Corporation tended to caricature existing preschool education as another 'wasteland', like television: there had been too much play in the sandbox, she asserted, and too little formal teaching. However, Cooney argued that educators were now moving beyond progressive child-centred ideas, towards what was (perhaps confusingly) called a 'cognitivist' approach – an approach that also appeared to be preferred by Carnegie itself. According to the report, old-style ideas of learning through play were being abandoned in favour of a much more direct instructional approach, informed by behaviourist forms of 'child science'. The curriculum was coming to be defined in terms of itemized lists of cognitive skills,

which would effectively be drilled through repetition, reinforcement and constant testing.

Cooney was particularly impressed by the work of Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann, two researchers at the University of Illinois, whose accounts of classroom instruction with disadvantaged children resemble those of an instructional boot camp. In their book *Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool*, these authors describe such children as ‘handicapped’: they are seen entirely in terms of their ‘deficiencies’ and ‘deficits’. In their method, children were subjected to what they called ‘verbal bombardment’, and required to recite correct answers in a kind of unison drill: this was backed up by a rigorous system of rewards and punishments. According to Bereiter and Engelmann, this was the only way such children would ever stand a chance of ‘catching up’ with their white peers: ‘nonacademic’ objectives and other ‘amusements’ would have to be avoided, or at least relegated to a secondary position.²² (Interestingly, Bereiter was subsequently critical of *Sesame Street* on the grounds that it was insufficiently instructional, and yet that it was too difficult for disadvantaged children to follow.²³)

In many respects, ‘cognitivism’ represented a dramatic narrowing of the aims of preschool education, although some clearly saw this as realistic and necessary. In his book *Children and Television*, for example, Gerald Lesser argued that educators had spent too long addressing the social and emotional dimensions of learning, and making promises about how this would solve wider social problems and injustices. In his view, they had largely failed to deliver: it was time to get real about what disadvantaged kids actually needed.

The *Sesame Street* curriculum that eventually emerged drew heavily on Bereiter and Engelmann’s approach, with its taxonomies of cognitive skills; as indeed did some aspects of the programme’s pedagogic style (most obviously the use of repetitive, fast-paced techniques taken from television commercials). This went well beyond simple letter and number recognition, encompassing forms of logical classification, visual discrimination and reasoning skills. Questions about children’s emotional and social development – which had been central to earlier, child-centred forms of education – proved much harder to define (and indeed to measure) in such mechanical terms, and tended to be left aside. This was subsequently accentuated by the emphasis on quantitative evaluation, which was so necessary if CTW was to retain its funding: as both Lesser and the evaluation agency (the Educational Testing Service) acknowledged, there was little point in testing anything that could not easily be tested.

Defining problems and solutions

If the social and educational problem to be addressed was defined in particular ways, therefore, so too was the potential solution. The particular characteristics of this approach can be brought into sharper focus if we contrast it with the arguments of one of *Sesame Street*’s early critics, the radical educator John Holt. In an article published in 1971, Holt offered some forthright criticisms of the basic aims of the show – although his overall tone was one of disappointment at what he saw as a missed opportunity. He began by challenging the deficit model that he saw as the

show's starting point. 'Poor kids and rich kids are more alike when they come to school than is commonly believed,' he argued, 'and the difference is not the main reason poor kids do badly when they get there. In most ways, schools are rigged against the poor; curing 'learning deficits' by Head Start, Sesame Street, or any other means, is not going to change that.' In setting out to prepare children for school as it is, Holt argued, *Sesame Street* avoided the challenge of offering children something different – the things that schools may never teach.

Holt also challenged the programme's basic pedagogy. Rather than showing children actively engaged in figuring things out for themselves, it simply showed them 'learning Right Answers... to leading questions put by adults'. *Sesame Street*, Holt argued, was like 'a conventional school run by supergifted teachers':

It is full of little invisible lesson plans, complete with behavioral objectives and motivating devices. It assumes, like most schools, that nobody ever learns anything by himself, naturally, incidentally, as a byproduct of doing or attending to something important to him; that on the contrary, everything, however trivial, must be deliberately taught, and will be taught best if it is taught all by itself, cut off from all connections with the rest of life.

Holt went on to develop a detailed critique of the programme's approach to teaching reading and basic mathematics, but he also offered some specific (and quite realistic) suggestions for an alternative approach. Far from dismissing television as a medium, he suggested that it could be used in more challenging ways: 'The screen is almost never used, as it might be, to convey ideas, information, relationships that *cannot* be conveyed with words — ideas that would be of far greater subtlety, complexity, and power.' Television, Holt argued, offered a more radical possibility:

Sesame Street still seems built on the idea that its job is to get children ready for school. Suppose it summoned up its courage, took a deep breath, and said, 'We are the school.' Suppose it asked itself, not how to help children get better at the task of pleasing first-grade teachers, but how to help them get better at the vastly more interesting and important task — which they are already good at — of learning from the world and people around them.

Underlying Holt's argument is a radical 'liberationist' view of the child as a social actor – a view that is elaborated in several of his books, most notably *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children*, published in 1974. In terms of the familiar binary, Holt regards the child as a *being* in the here-and-now, not as a *becoming*, who is developing towards a finished adult state. By contrast, for *Sesame Street*, any 'liberation' the child might need or desire is only to be achieved in the future, once they have learned their lessons.²⁴ While Holt's main criticisms might well be viewed as irrelevant or utopian,²⁵ they do throw into relief some of the fundamental constraints and limitations of *Sesame Street*'s aims and methods. Of course, for Cooney and her colleagues, there was no alternative to working within what they saw as the bounds of the possible: using television in the more radical way Holt was indicating was never an option.

Solving the problem?

To what extent could an initiative like *Sesame Street* ever have solved the social and educational problems its founders identified? For many of its critics, the idea that television might offer a solution of any kind was highly questionable. Prior to this point, educational television had been mostly made for use in schools: it was poorly funded and little used, and rarely contained the kind of entertaining elements that were likely to attract a wider audience. Yet as we'll see, there was also a fundamental contradiction in targeting a specific social group using a medium that was universally available; and once federal and philanthropic funding was withdrawn, the programme would need to maximize its audience in any case, simply in order to survive. In this situation, closing or narrowing educational gaps was likely to prove difficult, if not impossible.

One might well argue – as critics like *New York Times* journalist Linda Francke did at the time – that a high-profile television show provided politicians with a useful means of being seen to address the problem of educational underachievement. More concerted educational efforts – such as free, universal pre-school provision – would have been much more costly, and were considered politically impossible. Initiatives like Head Start were only ever intended to reach a relatively small fraction of the age group; by contrast, *Sesame Street* could potentially reach all of them, in a very visible way. Yet there was clearly a danger here that *Sesame Street* might be little more than a kind of token gesture.

For Cooney (who had been brought up in a devout Catholic family, and was later associated with the evangelical Christopher Movement) and for philanthropists like Morrisett, *Sesame Street* was a means of doing good for poor children, which amounted to a kind of missionary crusade. The show was funded primarily on the basis that it was going to ameliorate the apparent crisis in public education; and beyond that, to provide at least partial compensation for disadvantage. This was the 'policy button' that Cooney and Morrisett pressed repeatedly in their efforts to obtain funding, especially from the federal Office of Education and the Ford Foundation. As we'll see, they realized fairly soon that bridging this gap was unlikely to be straightforward, and sought to row back from such claims – in some cases, denying (quite falsely) that they had ever made them.

I'll come back to the controversies that developed around this issue in due course; but ultimately I don't think it's helpful to see any of this as a matter of individual hypocrisy. The claims and compromises that CTW had to make were partly a result of structural and economic constraints: getting the show on the air, and ensuring its survival, required them to make some large promises that they could never have fulfilled. Yet these difficulties were also political; and in this respect, the contradictions of *Sesame Street* need to be seen as symptomatic of the broader limitations of liberal social reform at the time.

Representation on and behind the screen

We feel emphatically that there is a great and growing need for minority-group representation on the air and in the studios and offices of the TV industry, developing material that will be useful to this and coming generations of youngsters – and grown-ups – of all races. Minority-group citizens can no longer settle for a tap dancer or a bandit as a representative of their race and culture on television. TV programs that reflect minority-group interests, programs that they believe in and take pride from, are the kind that the television industry must provide and provide as soon as possible.

Joan Ganz Cooney, testimony to Senate Committee, 1970.²⁶

Despite some later disclaimers, *Sesame Street* was undoubtedly setting out to reach and engage African-American children in particular – and it was certainly perceived in this way by the wider public. Yet, not to put too fine a point on it, all the key founders of the Children’s Television Workshop, and almost all of those who went on to devise and produce *Sesame Street*, were white. As such, ‘race’ was bound to be a complex and sensitive issue from the outset.

Sesame Street emerged at a time when there was growing pressure to increase and improve the representation of African-Americans within the television industry, both on screen and behind the scenes. Organisations like New York’s Community Film Workshop Council, directed by Cliff Frazier, conducted high-profile campaigns on these issues, involving black celebrities like Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte, alongside liberal whites like Shirley MacLaine and Sidney Lumet. In addition to training and providing networking opportunities for young black film-makers, it also sought to challenge negative stereotypes in mainstream media; and from a fairly early stage, African-Americans made common cause on these issues with Hispanics, Native Americans and the rural poor (for example, in Appalachia).

Cooney and Morrisett were liberal integrationists – Cooney later described the civil rights movement as ‘the great passion of those years for me’²⁷ – and they knew they would have to address this issue at an early stage. Several African Americans were engaged in key staff positions. Matt Robinson, who eventually assumed a central on-screen role, was originally one of several associate producers; others like Jane O’Connor, an early curriculum co-ordinator, were also involved behind the scenes; and the ‘utilization’ department, which sought to promote the programme in inner-city communities, was led by Evelyn Payne Davis, who was recruited from a role in the National Urban League. These appointments received considerable positive coverage from African-American newspapers like New York’s *Amsterdam News* as well as upmarket magazines like *Essence* and *Ebony*.

Blacks were also invited to join the CTW Board of Advisers: Dr. Chester M. Pierce, of the Black Psychiatrists of America, was one prominent member, who later enjoyed CTW’s support in directing his own film project on black identity. CTW engaged a black public relations consultant, Jimmy Booker, to manage its relations with the African-American community: he was instrumental in engaging black and Hispanic members of the Board, and in liaising with organizations like the NAACP, but he also played a key role in ‘catching the flak’ from potentially awkward critics

such as the Center for Urban Education and the National Association of Black Media Producers. As such, African-Americans were involved in several capacities at CTW, although this should not be overstated: *Sesame Street* may have targeted black communities in particular, but very few of those involved in creating it actually came from such communities.

According to the cognitivists who shaped its curriculum, much of the educational content of *Sesame Street* was culture-free: it could and should be transmitted to children irrespective of their social background. Nevertheless, several other aspects of the show were clearly intended to be much more socially and culturally specific. For example, in an early report to Carnegie, it was argued that the programme would feature 'more material reflecting black cultural life and language styles'. The inclusion of 'some spoken dialect and considerably informal "street" language' was intended 'to enhance the target viewer's sense of identification with the show, to contribute to the child's self-concept development by implicitly assuring him that his speech pattern was acceptable, and to promote acceptance of speech forms different from his own'.²⁸ This argument strongly suggests that CTW was offering an alternative to 'deficit models', which regarded the 'restricted' language of African-American children as both a symptom and a cause of their educational underachievement. (A similar rationale was later used for the inclusion of Hispanic cultural and linguistic elements.)

Likewise, the street scenes in particular were clearly directed towards 'urban' (that is, black) children. The human on-screen cast was integrated, with Loretta Long and Matt Robinson taking the two key roles of Susan and Gordon alongside two white performers; and black guest stars (Belafonte, Bill Cosby, B.B. King, James Earl Jones) were included from the outset, not least in order to attract adult viewers. The Street itself was intended to represent an impoverished urban area; and many of the documentary film sequences also routinely featured non-white children in urban settings.

Early statements by key personnel – for example in the quote from Cooney at the start of this section – show that this was an overt and deliberate strategy, intended to target disadvantaged non-white children in particular. As Evelyn Davis put it, 'that called for an urban setting, because the large urban areas seemed to be where the greatest crises existed. Consequently, the set was designed to reflect a typical, recognizable inner-city block, and the cast was to be representative of an urban community. The idea was to provide self-identity for inner-city children.'²⁹

As Cooney later acknowledged³⁰, some commentators found this 'shocking': previously, at least in US television, 'children's shows were always placed in magic rooms, or in suburbs, or in somewhere not urban'. 'It was probably the only realistic setting that any children's show had ever been set in,' she asserted³¹ - although, after early test screenings, the distinctly unrealistic Muppets were brought in to give the street scenes some additional appeal. On the other hand, some critics felt that the urban setting was unduly sanitized; while others argued that *Sesame Street* – and the Muppets in particular – still reproduced negative stereotypes. Within CTW itself, there were some who argued that ethnic differences and cultural styles should be explicitly referenced, and indeed celebrated; while others argued that the programme should adopt a 'colour-blind' approach, in order to teach children that

such differences did not matter – a view epitomized in Kermit’s well-known song ‘It’s not easy bein’ green’.³² While representation behind the screen, in production and advisory roles, might have appeared relatively straightforward, representation on screen remained much more problematic and contentious.

The ideal and the real

In some respects, *Sesame Street* was trapped in a familiar dilemma here. In seeking to counteract or avoid negative stereotypes, it ran the risk of creating an artificially rosy view. The imperative of realism – to show the world accurately, as it really is – ran up against the wish to present ‘positive images’ that were assumed to nurture disadvantaged children’s sense of pride and self-esteem, as well as promoting tolerance and empathy among children in general. On both sides, these arguments are premised on assumptions about the effects of media, which take on a particular force when it comes to children: positive images (or ‘role models’) are deemed to have positive effects, especially on impressionable minds, and the opposite is true for ‘negative’ ones.

Perhaps unfortunately, it’s never quite as easy as that. Some early critics and supporters of *Sesame Street* acknowledged its good intentions, but worried that it was artificially sugar-coating the difficult realities of inner-city, ghetto life. At an early meeting of the CTW Advisory Board, the child psychiatrist Leon Eisenberg expressed concern that the show was ‘unrelated to the problems that confront the inner-city child’, and suggested the producers should write scenes in which the children ‘participate in a rent strike’.³³ The noted psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, reviewing the programme in *Psychology Today*, was generally positive, but also accused the programme of providing a ‘bland’ image of inner-city life, without conflicts or difficulties. The children, he noted, were all ‘charming, soft-spoken, cooperative, clean and well-behaved’ – with the exception of the ‘crash-bang’ action of some of the Muppets. Linda Francke, in the *New York Times* magazine, went further, reporting on her interviews with child-care workers and parents in the city’s black communities. According to them, *Sesame Street* was quite unreal. ‘As far as *Sesame Street* is concerned,’ said one, ‘there are no drunks, there are no dope addicts. It doesn’t make half sense.’ Another accused it being ‘bland, plastic programming for white, middle-class America’. ‘They should take the damn cameras into those neighborhoods,’ he said, ‘and show it like it is and equip the children to cope with the realities as they are.’³⁴

Contemporary writers have (quite correctly) emphasized the wider historical context in this respect. Jennifer Mandel argues that *Sesame Street*’s image of the inner city exemplifies Martin Luther King’s vision of the multicultural ‘beloved community’, with its central emphasis on racial integration and harmonious co-existence. Rather than the images of conflict and deprivation that dominated news media, it showed the urban neighbourhood as vibrant, upbeat and thriving. The adults were happy, caring and mutually supportive, and constantly reinforced moral lessons about tolerance and humanitarianism.

More recently, Benjamin Looker has located *Sesame Street* in the context of a broader upsurge in ‘optimistic and even exuberant renderings of urban

neighborhood life' that began to appear in the late 1960s and 1970s. As he argues, such representations contrasted with considerable evidence that such neighbourhoods were spiraling towards collapse. They also offered a counterbalance to the charges of racism that were increasingly coming from black nationalist movements. Such images offered a kind of 'liberal utopia', an imagined community in which good-neighbourliness and tolerance would transcend poverty and hatred: 'the local city neighborhood became a screen upon which radical liberals could project anxious hopes for a tolerant, pluralistic society'. Looker argues that, like other representations of the period, *Sesame Street* combined this projection into a utopian future with an almost nostalgic rendering of a more stable, comforting urban past: against the contemporary context of rampant unemployment, the show's characters were shown not just as residents but as *workers* (trash collectors, postal workers, shopkeepers, but also teachers and doctors).

There was certainly debate about these issues among the staff of CTW as the series' early seasons were developed, and some pushed for a less sugar-coated approach. Matt Robinson (who played 'Gordon', one of the black co-stars) argued that the 'diluted' approach would not work with disadvantaged children: 'these kids need less fantasy and ... more realism in black-oriented problems.'³⁵ A 'writers' notebook' from 1970-71 proposed storylines featuring 'community problems' such as inadequate heating, demolished buildings, vermin, garbage and pollution. It was proposed that the programme should focus on conflict, injustice and difference, rather than just co-operation and mutual empathy.³⁶ The following year, one programme featured several protest songs performed by an African-American preacher and civil rights activist, Reverend Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick – 'River Song' was about the responsibility of the rich for urban pollution, 'The Ballad of Harriet Tubman' covered her escape from slavery, while 'The Ballad of Martin Luther King' focused on his assassination – although this attracted some letters of criticism.³⁷

Gerald Lesser was ambivalent about the educational value of this approach. 'If a child lives in a city ghetto,' he asked, 'what do we gain in using television to depict its harsh realities?'³⁸ As Cooney herself acknowledged at the time, her own perspective was 'more Westchester than Watts' – that is, more white and middle-class than drawn from the urban ghetto.³⁹ Given her background, one could hardly have expected it to be otherwise. Ultimately, a degree of realism was necessary, but it should not go too far: here, as in its wider educational mission, CTW needed to have its cake and eat it.

Debating with Muppets

As this implies, the issue of ethnic representation in *Sesame Street* was a continuing focus of debate, both within CTW and in the wider public sphere. What some saw as 'positive images' were condemned by others as bland and unrealistic. Characters who some saw as a welcome recognition of African-American culture and identity were seen by others as patronising or demeaning stereotypes. Perhaps surprisingly, these different views were sometimes more apparent in relation to the Muppet characters than the human ones: although few of the Muppets are ethnically 'coded', it seems that diversity has been more difficult to achieve here.

For example, in her interviews with Harlem residents, Linda Francke found there was considerable disquiet about the character of Oscar the Grouch, the ill-tempered green Muppet who lives in a trash can on the Street. 'That to me is the inner-city character,' one day care centre director told her; 'he's the one who's bottled up, and who compensates for it by saying he likes to live in a garbage can. That's really like saying it's all right to live in a dump. I don't agree with that. And the kids call it phony.' These views were echoed by others, including a black Minister: 'the Man is perpetuating the idea that that's where you're going to live and you ought to be happy living there'. When presented with these comments, Joan Cooney asserted that in her view 'little black kids' would be unlikely to identify with Oscar in the first place (although she didn't appear to have any evidence on this).

Another, more obviously 'black' Muppet character who attracted controversy during the early seasons was Roosevelt Franklin. According to Michael Davis, Roosevelt was introduced in Season 2 in order to address criticisms from some in the black community that the programme lacked 'soul', and that it should feature black vernacular language and humour more prominently.⁴⁰ Roosevelt was a somewhat unruly elementary school pupil, but he often seemed to end up teaching the class, and the school was even named after him. Although the puppet was purple, Roosevelt was clearly figured as African-American, and was created and voiced by Matt Robinson (while his mother was voiced by Loretta Long): he spoke in a form of rap or jive talk, strutted into the classroom to the rhythm of 'black' music, and repeatedly played the fool. Jane O'Connor, an African-American member of CTW staff, expressed concern that Roosevelt was too 'one-dimensional', and called for some research on the issue⁴¹; although Loretta Long, who later wrote her PhD on *Sesame Street*, regarded him in a more positive light, not least because he seemed well-informed as well as cool.⁴²

Roosevelt also came in for external criticism. If some clearly saw him as 'too black', others regarded him as 'not black enough'. Educationalist Barbara Stewart, writing in the journal *Black World*, argued that Roosevelt spoke in a kind of 'stage Negro dialect' – a Southern-inflected version of standard English that misrepresented the real nature of Black Language, and reinforced notions of 'linguistic deficit'. Stewart argued that 'the oppressor' (that is, the producers of *Sesame Street*) was bound to serve his own interests: 'the only effective educational program for the majority of Black children in this country,' she argued, 'must be one devised and controlled by Blacks who, although having acquired certain technical skills, continue to identify with the interests of the Black masses rather than with European interests.'⁴³ A couple of years later, Dr Carolyn Jetter Greene of the Bay Area Association of Black Psychologists wrote to CTW, arguing that the Roosevelt Franklin scenes showed young people that 'the classroom is some kind of joke and that they should behave accordingly'. While Greene accepted that Franklin's chaotic classroom was 'unfortunately... typical of all too many classrooms', she asserted that it was likely to have a negative influence on children.⁴⁴

Back at CTW, Evelyn Davis and others appeared to agree – although Joan Cooney worried that this was a conservative, 'upper-middle-class' black view. While she struggled to deal with criticisms from within the black community, she also regularly received letters from viewers complaining that there were 'too many blacks' on the

show, and stations in some conservative Southern states such as Mississippi initially refused to screen it, apparently on these grounds.⁴⁵ In successive efforts to deal with the problem, Franklin was later transformed into a teacher and then a celebrity in his own right. However, a later internal CTW report suggested that the character might have been ‘perpetuating more negative stereotypes about black children in classroom settings than it’s worth’⁴⁶; and – against opposition from some of the black performers – Roosevelt was eventually phased out.

As a later academic critic, Heidi Louise Cooper, points out, the issues here are not easy to resolve. For a start, puppet comedy tends to rely on caricature and physical humour, which means that it may be more inclined to rely on stereotypes. Cooper contrasts Roosevelt Franklin with a later ‘black’ Muppet character, the preppy and nerdish Kingston Livingston III, arguing that ‘negative’ stereotypes cannot simply be replaced by ‘positive’ ones; and she also draws in the example of Elmo, probably the most successful *Sesame Street* character of recent years, who is less obviously coded as ‘black’, and yet appears to be perceived in this way by black viewers. Unlike the other characters, Elmo is not represented as either positive or negative, as a stereotype or an anti-stereotype – and in a sense, Cooper suggests, it is these kinds of binary distinctions that need to be transcended.

Ultimately, all these arguments rest on assumptions about media effects – and in particular about the influence of ‘role models’ on children. Such effects are seen to vary according to the ethnic background of the audience, and the intended outcome. If the producers’ aim was to promote ‘self-esteem’ among black viewers, the aim for whites was a more nebulous form of ‘tolerance’. Yet it’s possible that such objectives may conflict; that black children may identify with white ‘role models’, and vice-versa; that ‘positive’ images may not always have ‘positive’ effects; and indeed that there will be disagreements on what counts as positive or negative in the first place. Meanwhile, as I’ve suggested, such imperatives are cut across by the requirement for realism (or at least plausibility or authenticity, which are not quite the same thing). How far these assumptions are accurate is a challenging question. Some have argued that useful evidence on these points can be obtained by looking at viewers’ online forums – although such evidence is likely to be very partial and unreliable.⁴⁷ What remains striking is that, despite the centrality of these aims and the complexity of the issues at stake, almost none of the enormous volume of research on *Sesame Street* has addressed them.

From ‘race’ to ‘diversity’

As these examples suggest, debates about representation were starting to become very visible at the time, and often received wider media coverage; yet in the process, questions about ‘race’ were also cut across by other concerns. In fact, some of the most vocal criticisms of the early seasons came from feminists. They argued that female characters in the show tended to occupy secondary roles, and were often portrayed in limited and stereotypical ways; and that even in the animated sequences, voice-overs were almost exclusively male. They also pointed out that, although several of the Muppet characters were androgynous, those who were gendered were almost all male: the few female Muppets were typically weak and ineffectual, affecting an exaggerated femininity. (With the exception of Jane Henson,

all the puppeteers were male. Jim Henson argued that female Muppets would have required female puppeteers; and he even asserted that women would have been incapable of lifting such large puppets.)

Much of this feminist criticism was extremely detailed and well documented in reports and academic papers; and some of it appeared in high-profile publications like *The New York Times*, where Jane Bergman went so far as to accuse the programme of 'vicious, relentless sexism'.⁴⁸ It was also backed up by quite plausible threats of picketing and boycotting of advertisers, as well as a vigorous letter-writing campaign organized by NOW (the National Organization of Women).

In many instances, these criticisms were completely on point, but they cut across the issue of 'race' in ways that proved quite challenging for CTW to address. In light of the pathological view of the black family contained in publications like the Moynihan Report, the programme had set out to provide a corrective. Gordon and Susan, the two black hosts in the street scenes, were a stable, married couple (the decision to marry them was apparently made for fear of attracting criticism that the show was stigmatizing black unmarried couples).⁴⁹ Gordon was a teacher, and although he was never seen in the classroom, he was often shown teaching the children in the street. As CTW saw it, he represented an attempt (along with the other male characters) to 'defeminize' the early learning environment⁵⁰; although producer Jon Stone later described it as an instance of 'real middle-class modelling' – suggesting (not for the first time) that there was also a class dimension to the show's preferred image of African-Americans.⁵¹ However, the character of Susan was initially somewhat secondary, and even subservient. 'We had thought it was a nice idea to have a strong black man supporting his wife', Cooney later said⁵²; but feminist criticisms of the presentation of Susan as a mere 'housewife' eventually obliged CTW to give her a job as a nurse (although there was then further criticism of her adopting 'a woman's profession').

In these debates, there was effectively a contest for priority between gender and race. In responding, Cooney described herself as a feminist, and presented herself as being on the side of NOW – although some of her internal memos were less sympathetic.⁵³ In the case of Susan and Gordon, she seemed to accept that 'presenting a strong competent male image to inner city children who often do not have a strong masculine figure in their lives' might have been achieved 'at the expense of our female audience'. In general, however, she claimed that 'the primary aim of reaching the disadvantaged child' (that is, the black child) took precedence. In one of her responses to NOW, she argued that the show's 'positive images' of blacks were in line with calls from the African-American community, and from her own black staff; and she went so far as to accuse NOW of displaying 'anti-black' attitudes.⁵⁴ Ultimately, CTW developed a rather less confrontational 'flak-catching' strategy in order to deflect such criticisms: through the mid-1970s, a group of women from NOW were engaged to produce a series of reports on 'sex roles in *Sesame Street*', which began to point to signs of progress.

Meanwhile, in terms of ethnicity, some of the attention also began to shift away from African-Americans. Strong criticisms had been encountered at an early stage from groups representing Hispanic communities, who accused the programme of racism.⁵⁵ Once again, CTW responded by engaging Hispanic representatives as advisers, and

as the decade progressed, CTW's focus on ethnic inclusion began to shift in this direction: there was an emphasis on the Spanish language (with English-speaking performers shown learning Spanish) and on aspects of Latino cultural heritage and art forms. Critics argued that, all too often, the Spanish material was simply a translation from English with little Spanish cultural roots or context. In general, however, this appeared to be an easier difficulty for CTW to address; and the thorny issue of representing 'race' gradually merged into a more inclusive, but also more bland and less overtly political, emphasis on *diversity*.⁵⁶

As Robert Morrow suggests, *Sesame Street* has come to be regarded over time as 'the archangel of multiculturalism'.⁵⁷ It is the 'poster show' for diversity, tolerance and inclusion, and it has been massively influential in this respect – although as such, it has continued to be a highly visible target for criticism on all sides. Aside from 'race', this approach has extended to many other areas: in 2015, for example, it debuted an autistic Muppet character named Julia – although here again, this went on to generate some controversy among advocacy groups.⁵⁸ As I have implied, these kinds of debates are unlikely to be easily resolved: on the contrary, they reflect the inevitable tensions and contradictions of liberal multiculturalism itself. Some of the same issues emerge in a rather different way in relation to the second major issue I'll discuss in the following sections of this essay: the question of how *Sesame Street* addressed the problem of educational disadvantage, and how successful it was in doing so.

Narrowing the gaps?

In October 1966, at the invitation of Lloyd Morrisett, Joan Ganz Cooney produced her first report for the Carnegie Corporation, entitled 'The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education'. It included the outcomes of her general scoping of the field of preschool education, as well as an ambitious proposal for a new television series. Afterwards, Cooney went back to work at WNET, but in 1967, as interest in the report began to grow, she was again bought out of her full-time job by Carnegie to produce a second report, 'Television for Preschool Children: A Proposal', jointly authored with Linda Gottlieb, a freelance writer: this report included a shortened version of the first, alongside more specific plans that effectively became the blueprint for *Sesame Street*. Both reports made much of the need to close the gap between 'disadvantaged' and 'middle-class' children; and both asserted that disadvantaged children would be a 'primary concern' and a 'crucial target' for any funded initiative. The imperative need to reach such children – those 'whose intellectual and cultural preparation might otherwise be less than adequate', as Cooney put it – would require considerable efforts directed specifically at 'ghetto cities' or 'poverty areas'.⁵⁹

In March 1968, representatives of its three major funders – Alan Pifer, the President of the Carnegie Corporation, Harold Howe, the Federal Commissioner of Education, and McGeorge Bundy, the President of the Ford Foundation – held a press conference to announce the formation of the Children's Television Workshop. Their press release included a joint statement identifying the Workshop's key aims:

*Greater efforts to help close the gap between disadvantaged and middle-class children are urgently needed, but right now public school resources – funds and classroom space – are not nearly adequate. The Children’s Television Workshop could provide one immediate and practical answer, although by no means a final or total one.*⁶⁰

Appended to the press release were excerpts from Cooney’s original study, referring to ‘the urgent problems of disadvantaged children’ and the need to create ‘a more intellectually oriented preschool program’ for inner-city children – although they also claimed that such a program would address all children, not merely the disadvantaged.

About eighteen months later, a series of reports written by CTW staff for the Carnegie Corporation emphasized the ‘experimental’ nature of *Sesame Street*, but reiterated these basic aims. Cooney’s report ‘The First Year of *Sesame Street*: A History and Overview’ (December 1970) identified ‘disadvantaged children of the inner city’ as ‘a priority target’. It suggested that, in the years preceding the launch, ‘educators and psychologists were beginning to believe that the achievement gap between disadvantaged and middle-class children could best be reduced by injecting intellectual stimulation into the early years of the disadvantaged’.⁶¹

The following year, CTW published a glossy brochure entitled ‘Memo from the Children’s Television Workshop’ restating these central aims. Again, the programme was described as an ‘experiment’, in which ‘we concentrated on reaching the disadvantaged children, the ones of our inner-city neighborhoods, the ones who need *Sesame Street* the most’. CTW, it proclaimed, ‘does very much desire to serve as an early educator for children who otherwise would suffer the condition of no regular intellectual stimulation’. ‘For poor children,’ it went on, ‘television is most often their only continuing window on the world. They have far less access to stimulating toys and games, live in a far more limiting environment, and may know less regular and reassuring contact with parents’. Most of the images in the brochure show African-American children in urban settings; and one carries the caption (attributed to Cooney herself) ‘the intellectual achievement gap between the disadvantaged and middle-class child can be substantially narrowed if we begin teaching children early enough’ – an assertion that (the brochure claimed) had been borne out by the findings of independent research on *Sesame Street* conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).⁶²

These same basic points recur repeatedly, right across the material I have read and viewed about the early years of *Sesame Street*. They are there in contemporary documents – in proposals, grant reports, internal memos and press stories. They are there in somewhat later documents from the early 1970s, such as Loretta Long’s PhD thesis, the interviews with CTW staff conducted by Richard Polsky for his own PhD, and summaries of the research on the programme’s effectiveness.⁶³ They are apparent in descriptions of the work of CTW’s ‘Utilization Department’, and in CTW’s other publicity strategies, which specifically targeted disadvantaged communities. And they are there in much later recollections of the period, including those of Cooney and Morrisett.⁶⁴

There are certainly differences of emphasis here. Some of the quotations above might appear to reflect the ‘deficit model’ I have discussed, although they tend to talk around it: there is little recognition of what some contemporary researchers would call the ‘funds of knowledge’ that black children bring from home into the school. Some of these sources appear to place responsibility for the situation on disadvantaged families themselves, although most of them see the problem in wider social terms. Yet few identify the possibility that the cause of the underachievement of black children may lie with the racism of the school system itself. Interestingly, it’s only in Loretta Long’s PhD thesis that this issue is considered in any detail: she even argues (optimistically) that *Sesame Street* might serve as a kind of antidote to the ‘educational racism’ that such children will go on to encounter in school.⁶⁵ All these arguments reflect a wider debate about the nature and the causes of ‘deprivation’, and the underachievement of minority children in particular, that was emerging in the mid-1960s, and became significantly more intense in the following decade. Fifty years on, the debate continues – which is partly why the case of *Sesame Street* continues to be relevant today.⁶⁶

To propose that *Sesame Street* was aiming to bridge or narrow the gap between disadvantaged and middle-class children might well seem to be re-stating the blindingly obvious. Yet, as we shall see, this aim became controversial, not least in light of research that seemed to show that it was not succeeding. Looking more closely, what we find is a rather more fuzzy and inconsistent set of aims. In most cases, the formulation was ‘both/and’. *Sesame Street*, its proponents argued, was aiming to teach preschool children in general, but *particularly* those who were variously identified as poor, disadvantaged, needy, ‘inner-city’ kids – *as distinct from* others who were mostly described as ‘middle-class’. (Notably, ‘race’ is generally absent in these formulations, although it is sometimes obvious in some of the images that accompany them.) It was only when the potential conflict between these aims became more problematic, that there were attempts to disclaim the idea that ‘narrowing the gap’ was something *Sesame Street* had ever attempted in the first place.

Refining the goals

Anybody who has ever sought public or charitable funding (including academic researchers) will understand that there is inevitably a difference between rhetoric and reality. Cooney and her supporters had a product (or at least a promise) to sell. If they wanted to get it off the ground, they would need to make some big claims, or at least hint at them. They had to identify a problem that seemed urgent enough for their funders to prioritise; and they had to imply that they could at least go some way towards solving it.

Some historical accounts⁶⁷ have suggested that Cooney’s original proposals were rewritten at the behest of the Ford Foundation and the Office of Education in order to emphasise this focus on disadvantaged children. I doubt this. There’s no question that both Ford and the OE were seeking ways of addressing the issue of black underachievement, although this focus was evident right from the start in Cooney’s first report. In fact, it seems that some in the Office of Education were somewhat sceptical about this: Louis Hausman, a former broadcaster who was then a key

adviser to 'Doc' Howe, seems to have argued against targeting disadvantaged children 'too heavily', both because they would find it 'demeaning' and 'patronising', and also because 'you would lose the middle-class whites'.⁶⁸

What is clear is that, once the initial funding was secured, the *educational* goals of the programme became steadily reduced; and this was also reflected in the way it was evaluated. As with many similar projects, this was probably bound to happen; and to some extent it made sense in light of what was possible, and in relation to the wider funding environment. *Sesame Street* was never going to solve all the problems its advocates identified. However, this narrowing of its goals was also a result of the coming together of four key imperatives and assumptions.

Firstly, as I've noted, the educational theory that drove *Sesame Street* – again, clearly identified in Cooney's original scoping study – was known as 'cognitivism'⁶⁹: the emphasis here was on the repeated practice of particular mental skills. In fact, other aims (and implicit theories) were invoked as well: in the initial seminars that defined the programme's curriculum, there was extensive discussion of the social and emotional aspects of learning, for example – although these too were often defined in terms of 'skills'. As these open-ended discussions fed into the plans for the programme's first season, however, the 'cognitive' focus was emphasized, at the expense of these other elements. Goals that were deemed to be best suited both to television itself and to the programme's target audience were amplified, while a great many others were effectively dropped.⁷⁰

This emphasis was reinforced, secondly, by the imperative for testing – which, given the public and charitable funding, was a requirement that could not be avoided. CTW had to prove that the money was being spent wisely and with good effect. And yet it was bound to accept that there was little point in testing things that could not meaningfully be tested. As Cooney later put it, 'we had to choose things that could be measured'.⁷¹ Here again, the focus contracted accordingly, to the mastery of rudimentary 'cognitive' skills – letter and number recognition, simple perception and classification, basic reasoning, and so on – as defined in the form of specific behavioural objectives. Areas of 'social and moral development' and 'affective, emotional development' that were major aspects of the official curriculum aims were left aside; and the idea that *Sesame Street* might raise the 'self-esteem' of disadvantaged children, or improve 'racial tolerance', that were key aspects of the rhetoric surrounding the show, never featured in the evaluation. (I'll come on to this in more detail shortly.)

This narrowing of goals was further reinforced by a third factor: a set of beliefs or assumptions about television as a medium. Obviously, *Sesame Street* would achieve nothing if it failed to attract viewers. Although there was some discussion with commercial networks at an early stage, it was obvious that the programme was only ever likely to be screened on public TV channels; and the disadvantaged families that were its 'crucial target' rarely watched such channels. *Sesame Street* had to compete with entertainment programmes – including the cartoons and advertisements that (in the 'vast wasteland') tended to dominate children's viewing. To some extent, this meant that it was required to copy the methods of such programmes. Thus, while Cooney's initial reports suggested using a wide range of film and television formats –

including some that were quite experimental, and a long way from mainstream children's entertainment – the focus steadily reduced.

Finally, this also coincided with a set of ideas about what television as a medium was best suited to do in educational terms. Television was good at selling things, and there was no reason why it couldn't be good at 'selling' letters and numbers; it was a medium for putting across simple, straightforward messages, rather than encouraging independent enquiry or critical thinking. It was not, producers argued, an 'interactive' medium; and as such, it was ill-suited to addressing emotions.⁷² It was in the area of 'cognitive skills' that television's distinctive contribution could be made, or so it was argued: as Robert Davidson, CTW Assistant Director, put it, 'work in the cognitive area would be something that we could accomplish better using television'.⁷³

These three sets of assumptions came together with a fourth, which was to do with the programme's target audience. As we've seen, research had found that disadvantaged children were one or two years 'behind' white middle-class children on arriving at school – although the nature of this gap, and the reasons for it, were controversial. What these children needed in particular, it was argued, were the forms of 'cognitive' instruction and stimulation that were seen to be lacking in their home environment. Again, as Davidson put it, the curriculum was 'consciously compensatory for disadvantaged children': 'it was in the area of cognitive skills that children who had little enrichment at home, whose parents may not speak to them very much, certainly not in an educational way, it was in that area that they tended to be particularly deprived'. As this implies, the deficit or disadvantage that *Sesame Street* was intending to address was being defined in quite specific ways – and in ways that television seemed uniquely able to address.

As this implies, there was a level of coincidence and mutual reinforcement across these four areas – although the crucial point is that none of them should be regarded as inevitable. As I've argued elsewhere, it's interesting to compare CTW's formulation of these issues with those of the BBC during the same period, which resulted in a very different 'recipe' for preschool television, and for education.⁷⁴ However, this is not to say that there were not also tensions between these different areas. All of CTW's key production staff came from commercial television; and as the early seminars showed, they did not share much of a common language with academic researchers or educationalists. There were also tensions and debates within each of these areas – and even at this time, certain shared assumptions (for example, about 'deficits' or indeed about 'race') could not be spoken directly, for fear of appearing politically incorrect. This resulted in a certain strategic vagueness on key aims, even while the programme's curriculum objectives were being tightly nailed down. As we'll see, this became crucial once it was necessary to evaluate its success.

Reaching the target

As I've noted, Cooney and others in CTW were concerned that the 'particular' target audience – the 'bullseye of the target', as Cooney put it⁷⁵ – would not be reached. This was partly because such viewers were seen to be less interested in

educational television than their middle-class counterparts. However, there was also a particular technical problem: African-American viewers were more likely to have old-model TV sets, which made it difficult to tune in to the UHF channels on which such programmes were broadcast. As we'll see, an extensive range of outreach activities was devised in order to get the word out to such viewers, and then to enable them to make best educational use of the show.

Initial audience data, collected in 1969 by the Nielsen Corporation, suggested that *Sesame Street* was being watched somewhat less in low-income homes; and concern was expressed that, if this was the case, then it might actually widen rather than narrow the educational gap.⁷⁶ CTW's Head of Research Edward Palmer acknowledged that there was 'increasingly heavy viewing as we go up the economic scale', although he also expressed some justified scepticism about the reliability of such ratings research.⁷⁷

This was a sensitive issue, and CTW went on to commission the Yankelovich Organisation to conduct some more detailed research on 'ghetto audiences' in five areas the following year.⁷⁸ The reports showed fairly conclusively that the programme was indeed reaching its target, among Puerto Rican as well as African-American households; and there was a good deal of positive (although not detailed) feedback on the educational aspects specifically. Follow-up studies in 1971 on the series' second year, and then again in 1973 and 1978, showed penetration above 90%, and regular viewing between two thirds and three quarters of the available audience, with the exception of areas where the programme was only available on one UHF channel (such as Washington DC). Interestingly, the show was also being watched by significant numbers of older children (aged 6-11). By 1973, Yankelovich was able to conclude that *Sesame Street* had become 'virtually an institution with ghetto children', with rising figures year by year.

A related issue here was to do with the cost of support materials that were intended to supplement the programmes. CTW published and distributed its own free newsletters; but commercial publishers, seeing the programme's growing popularity, also wanted a piece of the action. With an eye to its own longer-term financial viability, CTW struck deals with publishers like Time-Life, although it was concerned that the cost of their books and learning 'kits' should not prove prohibitive for the key target audience. One early set of large-format books cost as much as \$3.95 each, well over \$20 in today's terms; while a Time-Life 'kit' (including filmstrips, audio cassettes, games, activity books and 'assessment cards') cost \$19.95, more than \$100 today. Although the kits sold well⁷⁹ and the company agreed to distribute some of this material for free, Cooney acknowledged that the deal was 'a terrible gaffe – we backed into it, and it's the wrong image. \$19.95 is not even middle-class.'⁸⁰ She told *Variety* that, while they wouldn't discourage middle-class parents from watching, 'we've made *Sesame Street* for the poor people and the ghetto communities', and any ancillary publications would need to be at a price 'people in the ghetto can afford'.⁸¹ Later publications were indeed significantly less expensive: a series proposed with the publisher Scholastic included books retailing at less than a dollar.⁸²

Assessing effects

Sesame Street may have been hitting its ‘bullseye’, but was it effective in teaching them – and particularly in narrowing the gap between disadvantaged and middle-class children? Despite later disclaimers, there’s no doubt that this was a key question for CTW. In addition to funding the Yankelovich studies specifically in ‘ghetto’ neighbourhoods, it also tasked ETS to look at this issue in its key large-scale evaluations of the first and second seasons. Much of the fieldwork focused specifically on low-income areas, which were often harder for researchers to access than middle-class suburbs: 731 of the 943 children involved in the first year study were classified as ‘disadvantaged’.

As I’ve noted, the educational objectives that were actually assessed by ETS were much narrower than those identified in the official curriculum – which were in turn much narrower than those that had been discussed at the early seminars, or (more loosely) identified in Cooney’s initial reports. Loretta Long’s PhD, written in 1973, reviews the research in some detail; but when it comes to evidence, for example about the show’s contribution to improving racial tolerance, or raising the self-esteem of disadvantaged children, she is bound to resort to anecdotes and viewers’ letters. Even when we look across the enormous body of research that has been conducted on the series over the past fifty years, there is much more about basic literacy and mathematical skills, and about factual recall of aspects of science and civics, than there is about the broader social or ‘non-cognitive’ aims with which the series began.⁸³

In terms of these basic skills, the first ETS studies showed that children were indeed capable of learning from the show. Children who watched the most, appeared to learn the most; the things they learnt best were the things that were shown most frequently; and they learnt more with adult intervention or support, although they were capable of learning without it. However, when it came to the achievement gap, the findings were rather more equivocal. Interestingly, ETS agreed with CTW that they would not report comparisons between children along ‘racial’ lines (blacks vs. whites vs. Hispanics), not least because they feared that this would be too sensitive to discuss in public settings.⁸⁴ However, ‘race’ was a variable in the study (for example in composing the sample), and there were comparisons between advantaged and disadvantaged children (abbreviated as ‘M.C’ and ‘W.C.’). In these terms, it appeared that disadvantaged children who were frequent viewers learned more than advantaged children who watched less frequently – although of course what was being assessed here was not learning or cognitive development in general, but learning of the particular selection of *Sesame Street*’s educational objectives that were chosen for analysis.

As far as CTW was concerned, the success of *Sesame Street* in narrowing the educational gap was pretty clear. Cooney’s first year report to the Carnegie Corporation in 1970 suggested that, on the basis of the ETS studies, the programme was being successful in meeting ‘one of the primary goals, namely, putting the disadvantaged child on an equal footing with his more fortunate and better motivated middle-class peer when they arrive together at the doorway of formal education’.⁸⁵ CTW’s glossy publicity brochure from 1971, cited above, repeated the comparison between disadvantaged regular viewers and advantaged infrequent

viewers, and suggested that the research had 'led to the conclusion that television can reduce the distinct educational gap that usually separates advantaged and disadvantaged children'. These broad conclusions were duly reported in the press, and were widely taken as a 'good news story'.

Challenging effects

A little further down the line, however, they came to be challenged, both by independent researchers, and by a major re-evaluation of the ETS studies. My interest here is not in the technicalities of the research itself, or even in the actual findings, so much as what the debates reveal about the fundamental aims of *Sesame Street*.

One early opponent of *Sesame Street* was Herbert Sprigle, director of the 'Learning to Learn School' in Jacksonville, Florida. Sprigle conducted a series of studies in 1970 and 1971 comparing the use of *Sesame Street* with face-to-face methods in his own schools. He argued that the programme failed to prepare 'poverty children' for the work they were to do in first grade, and that it did not narrow (and in fact increased) the achievement gap between them and their middle-class counterparts. Sprigle claimed that non-viewers were getting a more solid foundation that would enable them to advance faster in school; and that there were 'no permanent educational benefits' for those who watched the programme more frequently. There was a danger, he argued, that 'politicians will think all you have to do is fund *Sesame Street* and then forget about education for poverty kids'.⁸⁶

These findings clearly contradicted those of the ETS studies, and CTW's Head of Research Edward Palmer published an extensive rebuttal, which took a highly confrontational tone. Palmer argued that Sprigle's methods were 'so thoroughly flawed as to be meaningless': he was looking at the wrong age group, using inappropriate measures, failing to match the groups in his study adequately, and introducing all sorts of additional biases.⁸⁷ Furthermore, in failing to share all his data with CTW, he was guilty of a lack of 'professionalism'. Without going into all the technicalities, there's undoubtedly some truth in Palmer's response, but its vehemence is nevertheless quite extraordinary: however idiosyncratic his approach may have been, Sprigle had evidently touched a nerve. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Palmer's response in this respect, however, is his denial that *Sesame Street* was ever attempting to narrow the educational achievement gap in the first place – an issue to which we'll return shortly.

In fact, these concerns appeared to be more widely shared. In 1973, a report by Robert Yin, funded by the Markle Foundation and published by the Rand Corporation, pointed to some of the difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of CTW's work (which by this point also included a new series for older children, *The Electric Company*).⁸⁸ Yin asked some fundamental questions about what and how such evaluations should measure: for example, should they be confined to declared cognitive objectives, or should they consider 'non-cognitive' ones as well? Like Palmer, Yin effectively demolished the Sprigle studies; but he also questioned the validity of the ETS work, arguing that it used unreliable measures and limited samples.

However, it was a later re-evaluation of the ETS studies by Thomas Cook and his colleagues that provoked the most striking debate. Cook's study was funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, and published in 1975 (although it was circulated to CTW and ETS well before then, and publication was delayed by the ensuing disputes between them). As with Robert Yin's Markle/Rand study, I haven't been able to identify the reasons why the grant was made, but it may reflect the rivalry between the various foundations operating in the field. Cook and his team conducted an extensive and very detailed re-analysis of the ETS data, and many of their criticisms of these studies are highly technical: there is much discussion of the relevance and validity of different outcome measures, the composition and weighting of the samples, and so forth. In a sense, Cook and his team were playing ETS and CTW at their own game, and (unlike Sprigle, for example), this made him harder to dismiss. What is most relevant here, however, is the way the re-analysis, and the debate that followed, exposed the incoherence or inconsistency of CTW's original aims.

Cook focuses particularly on one of the key variables in the ETS study, the issue of 'encouragement to view'. In some instances, parents were encouraged to tune in, and also urged to encourage their children to watch; and comparisons were then made with households where there was no such encouragement. Cook points out that, without such encouragement, the learning gains from viewing were confined to basic letter and number recognition and 'relation skills'; but even in those cases, the differences were either very small or statistically insignificant. Encouraging some parents and children to view obviously created an artificial situation, which could not necessarily be replicated under normal circumstances. Indeed, it seems likely that, in reality, middle-class children would have more parental support than disadvantaged children, at least in relation to preparation for school. On the basis of ratings data (which were admittedly less reliable than ETS), Cook argued that advantaged children were more likely to view than disadvantaged children, and were thus likely to gain more, at least where gains were to be had. On the other hand, disadvantaged parents in the ETS study who were encouraged to view spent less time reading with their children. As a result, Cook concludes, 'Sesame Street is probably increasing achievement gaps in those domains where it effectively teaches'.⁸⁹

Of course, these points were disputed by CTW; but for Cook, the key issue was a broader one – it was to do with 'the difficulty of pursuing compensatory goals by means of a universalist strategy'⁹⁰. Cook argued that compensatory approaches may stigmatise their recipients as in some way deficient (via a deficit model); and that universalist approaches are unlikely to be equally used by all segments in society. In other words, CTW could not hope to teach all children via a universal medium like television, while simultaneously aiming to narrow the gap between rich and poor. If it was aiming to close the gap, the programme would have to be more available to disadvantaged children, or they would have to be more actively supported in using it, so that they learnt more; or alternatively, it would have to be less available and less supported for advantaged children. These two aims, Cook argued, were incompatible: *Sesame Street* could not have its cake and eat it.

Going back to Cooney's original funding proposal from 1968, Cook drew attention to the contradiction between the 'general aim' and the 'particular aim' of *Sesame Street*. Cooney's claim that the programme would stimulate 'the growth of

preschoolers, *particularly* disadvantaged preschoolers' was at least ambiguous: it did not clarify whether the programme would specifically target this group, or whether they would learn from it, or whether they would learn *more* than their economically advantaged peers. To this extent, 'particularly' would seem to be a conveniently evasive term.⁹¹

As Cook and his colleagues argued, this apparent inconsistency raised much broader questions about the aims and methods of social action initiatives that are intended to reduce inequality. Advocates of such initiatives needed to look harder at who actually made use of such programmes, and who got the most out of them. Was it more effective to target resources particularly at the disadvantaged, or to attempt to raise the overall level of achievement? How should efficiency in delivering a service (such as education) be balanced against the requirement for social justice?

Backtracking

Cook's re-analysis was fiercely challenged by both CTW and ETS.⁹² Collectively, they accused Cook of incompetence, of lacking relevant credentials, and of being 'petulant', unfair and misinformed. Again, there is a fair amount of technical discussion, but it is their response to his broader argument that is more striking. Both CTW and ETS effectively sought to disclaim the idea that *Sesame Street* had ever sought to narrow the gap in the first place. After some intense debate, Samuel Ball and Gerry Anne Bogatz of ETS secured a right of reply in the form of an appendix to the book; and after disputing many of the technical points, they made the key claim that 'closing the gap was not a goal of *Sesame Street*' – not least because, in their words, this was something 'no other universally available education [provision]... has been able to develop'.⁹³

Gerald Lesser's account of the early years of *Sesame Street* appeared before Cook's study, but he had certainly seen the re-analysis (and done the best he could to prevent its publication). He too offers the 'both/and' version of the story that is apparent in Cooney's various reports and public statements. Yet here again, there is also a direct denial: 'Since we hoped that all children would watch and learn, we *did not aspire to reduce the differences between poor and middle-class children*. But we did hope that our series would help to prepare poor children to do well in the schools as they are now organized and operated.' Lesser appears to accept the logic of Cook's argument that a 'universalist' strategy like a national TV show could not simultaneously reduce inequalities; but nevertheless he says he 'hoped' that the gap would not be widened. He agrees that CTW wanted to know whether children would learn regardless of their social background, but he also suggests that the comparisons in the ETS study between disadvantaged and middle-class children were 'not of interest' to CTW.⁹⁴

These are extraordinary claims. As I have shown at considerable length, closing (or attempting to close) the educational gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children was in fact a major aim identified in countless published and internal documents. It was a key dimension of the wider public context, and was clearly part of the reason why *Sesame Street* was funded in the first place. A substantial proportion of its early budget was spent precisely on attempting to reach out

specifically to disadvantaged children (as I'll describe in the following section). The comparison between advantaged and disadvantaged children was also implemented in the research itself, and reported in the published findings. To argue that this was not an aim in the first place was quite implausible.

Much later, Joan Cooney seemed to acknowledge that the aim had actually changed. Despite asserting that Cook's analysis was a 'misinterpretation', she appeared to have accepted at least some of his arguments. In an interview conducted in 1998, she presented the findings of the ETS research in a rather different way: 'it turned out that middle-class [children] moved faster, so there was always that gap... We brought both poor and middle-class children up higher than where they were, but we couldn't close the gap because everyone was running faster.' As a result, she said, 'we decided the aim was not to close the gap, but to get all children up above the literacy line, so they could go to school and hit the ground running, and learn to read.'⁹⁵

Reaching out

As I've noted, the issue of 'encouragement to view' was a key point of contention in the debates about the effectiveness of *Sesame Street*. Right from the outset, CTW knew that it would need to make special efforts to promote the show among the communities that it was specifically targeting. It established a 'Utilization Department' (later called 'National Field Services' and eventually – from about 1971 – 'Community Education Services', CES), with a substantial budget, and appointed Evelyn Payne Davis, a high-profile African-American community organizer, to run it.⁹⁶ The department focused quite specifically on poor areas with significant minority populations, mostly in inner cities, although it later extended to the rural poor in Appalachia and to Native American reservations. (Of course, it's hard to see why any of this would have been seen as necessary if *Sesame Street* was *not* aspiring to reduce the differences between disadvantaged and advantaged children...). This work has not been well documented, but it offers a very interesting case study – and perhaps even a 'model' – of how a medium like television might be used to support wider social action.

The initial task of the Utilization Department was simply to raise awareness of the launch of the show, and encourage people to tune in. CTW knew that parents in poor inner-city neighbourhoods were less inclined to watch public television channels, and might need help in locating the broadcasts on their dials. Most unusually, mainstream channels like NBC and CBS lent support to this promotional effort, running a pilot and spot announcements.⁹⁷ Following Davis's appointment, a few weeks before the first screening, teams of volunteers were sent out to distribute leaflets, convene meetings of parents and teachers, and take mobile trucks with promotional films into poor neighbourhoods. People were trained in how to tune in to UHF stations, as well as being informed about the show's educational aims. Although *Sesame Street* was not intended for use in schools, publicity was also sought through networks of parent-teacher associations, and in presentations to staff in Head Start centres. Jimmy Booker, an African-American PR consultant, was brought in to network with key black organizations like the Urban League and the

National Council of Negro Women, and secure positive coverage in black-oriented newspapers and magazines like *Ebony*.

Once the series went on air, these promotional activities were ratcheted up.⁹⁸ Local offices were set up in five cities, and this was extended to fifteen for the second season. Community-based viewing centres were established, particularly for those who might not have easy access to the broadcasts at home, and for children who were not in day care: initially run by volunteers (some from the neighbourhood youth corps), they met in libraries, public housing projects, churches, storefront premises, hospitals and health care facilities, and even in prisons. Mobile viewing centers were sent into some inner-city neighbourhoods, and people were encouraged to donate any surplus television sets. The viewing centres in turn distributed information leaflets to parents' groups and Head Start centres. In some instances, home viewing centres were established for people who were reluctant to attend a more formal neighbourhood meeting; while 'Sesame Mothers' programmes in Los Angeles and Chicago trained mothers to run viewing groups. There were live appearances of cast members, exhibitions and posters, training workshops and films, and a range of published materials, including a monthly 'parent/teacher guide'.

The scale of this activity is striking. For example, in New York, and later in other cities, Summer and Day Camp programmes were set up with the Neighborhood Youth Corps, which trained teenage volunteers to work with preschoolers: in 1971, 1200 young people and 15,000 children were involved.⁹⁹ A CTW press release in 1971 claimed that 2000 viewing centres had been established, reaching 20,000 children; while an article published in 1974 claimed that over 100,000 volunteers had been recruited since the programme's inception.¹⁰⁰

As the work progressed, there was a growing effort to provide additional support for parents in actively *using* the show with their children. It was well known – and the ETS studies certainly confirmed it – that the educational value of television was enhanced if parents watched with their children, and discussed and extended what they saw afterwards, even in quite informal ways. Although some of the ancillary materials (like the Time-Life books and kits) were only within reach of more affluent parents, inexpensive *Sesame Street* books and other print materials were also produced and distributed, in some instances for free. For example, Mobil Oil funded an inexpensively produced newsletter (available in supermarkets and stores) containing information about the educational features of upcoming episodes, and suggestions for parents on how to follow them up. There were cheaply produced, hand-made booklets with titles like 'A Manual of Things to do when Sesame Street is Over' or 'Sesame Street at Home', some of which contained hundreds of detailed suggestions for games, puzzles and play activities, as well as 'scripts' for educational dialogues between parents and children.¹⁰¹ Five million copies of the Mobil booklet were distributed, while CTW's own 'Parent Teacher Guide' apparently hit six million.

Some of this activity seems to have been fairly uneven, and even chaotic at first. It was hampered by familiar problems with outreach work, such as intermittent contact, a lack of adequate facilities, and the difficulties of working with volunteers. However, it was steadily professionalized. Paid local 'utilization directors' (or 'field service co-ordinators') were appointed, and required to produce regular, detailed

reports on their work.¹⁰² As well as convening viewing groups, the job included liaison with community groups and other local grassroots organizations (such as women's clubs, Vista and the Girl Scouts); securing positive media coverage in newspapers and on radio; providing training and question-and-answer sessions for teachers, health care workers and others; and, as far as possible, conducting research on people's responses to the programme. Local co-ordinators were provided with their own training manuals, newsletters and speakers' kits, as well as films, filmstrips, books and games to use in workshops. Achieving 'buy-in' from local communities was crucial, and representatives of key groups were invited to join their advisory and planning committees.

In principle, the mission of CES was in line with Cooney's 'both/and' approach: its mission statement talked about reaching 'communities around the nation, with an *emphasis on economically deprived neighborhoods*'.¹⁰³ In practice, however, these activities were almost exclusively targeted at disadvantaged children and their parents.¹⁰⁴ Some of them seem to have been premised on the kind of 'deficit models' I have identified. Rather than simply encouraging parents to watch and use the show, some of the local offices also set out to teach 'good parenting'.¹⁰⁵ A proposal for CES activities in 1971-2 exemplifies this, describing 'parent workshops intended to create a positive educational relationship between parent and child, the lack of which is likely to be one important way to distinguish the "disadvantaged" from the "advantaged" child'.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, some felt the aim was simply to build such parents' confidence: a training manual from the same period stressed that 'it is necessary to emphasise to [disadvantaged] parents the fact that they have the skills and knowledge that are certainly worth sharing'.¹⁰⁷

A more substantial history of this work remains to be written; and there seems to have been little systematic, independent evaluation. One article, published in 1970, offered a rather sceptical account of the outreach programme, at least in libraries: it suggested that most libraries had used *Sesame Street* as 'just one more promotion for the traditional, middle-class story hour', and that 'concerted efforts to help disadvantaged children' were 'virtually nonexistent'.¹⁰⁸ This was clearly not CTW's intention; but it seems likely that these activities took very different forms in different locations, and had different outcomes, however tightly they were managed. In the early 1980s, the CES mutated into the *Sesame Street PEP* (Preschool Education Program); and while this work was much more institutionally-based, there has been no conclusive evaluation of its overall impact.¹⁰⁹ More significantly, in terms of my interests here, the focus on disadvantaged children appears to have almost entirely disappeared from view.

Going forward

My focus in this essay has been on the inception and early years of *Sesame Street*: with one or two exceptions, I have not attempted to take the story beyond the very early 1970s. Broadly speaking, the issues I have considered were much more significant in the early years, and gradually faded from view. As I've suggested, concerns about the representation of African-American communities were gradually joined (and to some extent displaced) by an emphasis on other ethnic and minority groups. The interest in 'disadvantaged' children also seems to have faded by the late

1970s. It's interesting in this latter respect to compare the early *Sesame Street* newsletters for parents with those from the early 1980s. The newsletters remained free, although the production values of the later ones were much higher. However, it is the content that has particularly changed. The newsletters from the early 1980s contain interviews with childcare experts, PhDs and pediatricians, as well as reports on research, that resemble those of middle-class parenting magazines: the focus has moved a long way from the inner city 'ghetto'.¹¹⁰

To a large extent, this was inevitable. Given the changing political environment (Nixon's presidency began in 1969) and the increasingly commercial nature of children's television, it was unrealistic for CTW to expect ongoing government or charitable funding. *Sesame Street* was going to have to survive in a much more competitive marketplace; and this meant it needed to appeal to all. In seeking to cover its own costs, CTW came to rely both on ancillary merchandising, and on overseas sales. While it remains a non-profit organization, it increasingly has to operate like any other commercial player. As both Cooney and Morrisett have subsequently acknowledged, an innovation with the scale and ambition of *Sesame Street* could never have happened today. Programmes like *Barney and Friends* may present themselves as 'educational', but they are only made possible by the vast profits to be made from merchandising and licensing. Production costs have risen, and there is a good deal more children's television available; but public funding (especially for aspects such as CTW's research and outreach) would be impossible to achieve today.¹¹¹

In the 1980s and 1990s, CTW significantly expanded its merchandising activities, and in some instances appears to have over-reached itself, for example in areas such as theme parks and electronic games. For a programme that continues to air on public television, the opportunities here are obviously more limited; and the show's continuing 'educational' brand might well be seen as incompatible with certain types of products (books are generally acceptable, but toys and clothing might be more problematic in some cases – although Elmo has served CTW pretty well). It eventually made deals, not just recently with HBO, but also with Nickelodeon (on digital channels) and Disney (on the Muppets).

Today, much of *Sesame Street*'s funding – and what Morrisett calls its 'greatest mission opportunity' – is in international markets, especially in developing countries. In such locations, there is much less competition from domestic broadcasters, although there is also little money to be made from licensing and merchandising: the funding has to come primarily from governments and from international aid.¹¹² These projects might well be seen as another attempt to 'bridge gaps', albeit on a global level. In this context, *Sesame Street* represents itself, not as a commercial enterprise, but as a humanitarian intervention, and there is a strong missionary mentality in play. Equally, however, there are issues to do with representation, cultural differences and 'deficit models' that echo those I have discussed in relation to the US domestic context. While CTW purports to respect and support local cultural production, some critics see its international activities as merely another form of US 'communications imperialism'. But this is another complicated story that I won't be able to consider here.¹¹³

Conclusion

In both the areas I've discussed in this essay, *Sesame Street* consistently adopted what might be called a 'both/and' strategy. In terms of representation, it purported to offer a recognizable (if not wholly realistic) image of the lives of inner-city children; yet it also sought to provide 'positive images' – images that would promote self-esteem among the black minority, while also encouraging tolerance and understanding among the white majority. In terms of education, it set out to provide a form of remedial instruction that would bring disadvantaged African-American children up to the level of their white, middle-class counterparts; yet it *also* claimed to provide education for all children, irrespective of their background.

In looking back to its early years, I have sought to dispel some of the nostalgia – and even the sanctimoniousness – that tends to infuse contemporary discussions of *Sesame Street*. Yet it would be inappropriate and a-historical to judge it entirely by today's standards. It doesn't make sense to evaluate the programme's early representations of 'race' by the criteria of today's identity politics. Nor should we assess the validity of its educational claims in terms of current thinking about pedagogy and social justice. To some extent, this retrospective view is hard to avoid; but we should at least take account of what was possible at the time, and what it might reasonably expect to have achieved.

The claim that a national television programme, available to all, could ever narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their middle-class peers would seem to be a contradiction in terms. CTW almost certainly promised more than it could ever hope to deliver in this respect; yet it is surely ridiculous to deny that this was ever the aim. Nevertheless, its espousal of this ambitious aim should not be seen as merely hypocritical. It was partly necessary if the programme was to secure funding in the first place, and go on to survive in an increasingly difficult commercial environment. Here too, *Sesame Street*'s social and political aspirations need to be seen as a reflection of different strains within the majority liberal culture of the period.

Ultimately, *Sesame Street* was the product of a professional elite: the communities it set out to target were not significantly involved in devising and producing it. It represented a form of benevolent liberalism, with all the positive and negative aspects that would imply. Taking a broader view, it might well be condemned as a form of tokenism – as it was by critics like Linda Francke at the time. There were even some within government (such as the director of Head Start, Edward Zigler) who recognized that the programme might function merely as a 'band-aid', an easy substitute for the more fundamental reforms that were required.¹¹⁴ For their part, Cooney and her colleagues always insisted that *Sesame Street* was never intended to be a substitute for proper preschool education. Nevertheless, their argument was partly made on financial grounds: they frequently compared the costs per child of *Sesame Street* with those of face-to-face educational provision.¹¹⁵

For policy-makers and wealthy philanthropists, *Sesame Street* offered a means of throwing money at the problem of black educational underachievement, without having to address its fundamental causes. Although television might have appeared costly to some, it seemed to promise an inexpensive solution to the problem of

educational inequality, at least as it had been generally defined. Funding an entertaining, popular television show was criticized by those who were suspicious of the medium *per se*, and it wasn't cheap; but it was much less expensive – and much more likely to attract positive media attention – than providing free, universal preschool education.¹¹⁶ For some, it might have seemed like a bargain at the price.

Of course, the problems that *Sesame Street* sought to address have by no means disappeared. Black Lives Matter may be one very visible manifestation of that, but continuing African-American underachievement in US schools is certainly another.¹¹⁷ As I've suggested, the focus of attention for CTW has increasingly moved to the international market: as I write (in late 2019), a new version of the show targeting refugee children in Arabic-speaking countries is about to launch.¹¹⁸ I doubt that even CTW imagines that the Muppets will bring about world peace, but the missionary zeal clearly continues to take the show into very difficult circumstances. Of course, this isn't a zero sum game: attempting to teach mutual tolerance through *Sesame Street* is probably better than not doing so, but there is still a danger of distracting attention from the real causes of such problems, in favour of merely addressing the symptoms. In all these respects, *Sesame Street* continues to have lessons for us today.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

I have considered the formal and pedagogic aspects of *Sesame Street*, alongside those of a range of other preschool programmes, in another essay in this series: 'Watching with (and without) mother: education and entertainment in television for pre-school children', <https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/watching-with-and-without-mother-education-and-entertainment-in-television-for-pre-school-children/>

This essay draws on archival research in three locations: the Children's Television Workshop archive at the University of Maryland (UM/CTW); the Carnegie archive at Columbia University, New York City; and the Paley Center for Media, New York City. I'd like to thank the archivists and librarians in each location, especially Michael Henry at UM, Jennifer Comins at Columbia, and Jane Klain at the Paley Center. This aspect of the work was funded by an Emeritus Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust (UK), for which I am also very grateful.

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Joan Ganz Cooney: interview with John Callaway, 1983: Paley Center archive B11803

Joan Ganz Cooney: presentation at 'CTW: the First Quarter Century: Seminar 1', Paley Center, New York, 1993: Paley Center archive T28077

Gerald Lesser: presentation at 'CTW: the First Quarter Century: Seminar 2', Paley Center, New York, 1993: Paley Center archive T28028

Lloyd Morrisett: interview for TV Academy, 2004:
<https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/lloyd-morrisett>

The World According to Sesame Street (documentary feature, directed by Linda Costigan and Linda Goldstein-Knowlton, Participant Productions, 2006): Paley Center archive B93515

'First kids on the block: hosts of New York children's shows of the fifties and sixties', recording of Museum of Television and Radio seminar, 1994; and 'Howdy Doody' seminar, 1987: Paley Center archive T87:0469.

NOTES

¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/3/20897104/sesame-street-streaming-hbo-max-warnermedia-pbs-disney-apple-streaming-wars>

² <https://timeline.com/street-cleaning-tv-s-most-popular-kids-show-adapts-to-a-new-era-2aaa49d3e9f3>

³ Davis: 9.

⁴ TV Academy interview, 2004.

⁵ Spock, 'Children, Television and Sesame Street', *Redbook*, July 1970.

⁶ Interview with Polsky, Columbia Oral History Archive.

⁷ These criticisms came from the psychiatrist Dr. Natalie Shainess and the pre-school specialist Dr. Louise Bates Ames in 1971, and received widespread press coverage at the time.

⁸ These examples are drawn from a range of reports and internal documents, as well as some press reports, mostly from 1971 and 1972, in the UM/CTW archive, box 17: folders 40-54.

⁹ Interview with John Callaway, 1983: Paley Center video archive BI 1803.

¹⁰ Monica Sims, memo to EBU members, UM/CTW archive box 29: 12. For a little more detail on the grounds for the BBC's decision, see my essay 'Watching with (and without) mother' (link in list of references).

¹¹ Interview in the film *The World According to Sesame Street* (2006).

¹² Looker, 216-7.

¹³ The speech can be found at:

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm>

¹⁴ See Morrow, Chapter 1; and for a more critical account, Hendershot (1998).

¹⁵ These included Dave Connell, Jon Stone and Sam Gibbon.

¹⁶ This idea seems to have come from George Dessart, a programming executive at CBS.

¹⁷ Davis, 148.

¹⁸ TV Academy interview, 1998.

¹⁹ For example, see the essays included in J.L. Frost (ed.) *Early Childhood Education Rediscovered* (New York, Holt McDougal, 1968).

²⁰ CTW press release, as cited (for example) in *Palm Beach Times*, 2nd October 1969. Lesser's own earlier work, for example in his book *Mental Abilities of Children from Different Social-Class and Cultural Groups*, co-authored with Gordon Fifer and Donald Clark, exemplified this view, although it sought to move the debate in a more liberal direction.

²¹ For example in his book *Children and Television*.

²² Quotations from Bereiter and Engelmann, chapter 1.

²³ Cooney, 'The Potential Uses...', 22, 25-7.

²⁴ *Escape from Childhood* (New York, E.P. Dutton, 1974). I have discussed Holt's arguments for 'children's liberation' in a little more detail in another essay in this series, 'Children of the revolution? The hippy counter-culture, the idea of childhood and the case of *Schoolkids Oz*', at <https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/children-of-the-revolution-the-hippy-counter-culture-the-idea-of-childhood-and-the-case-of-schoolkids-oz/>

²⁵ They are effectively dismissed as such by Lesser in *Children and Television*, Chapter 7.

²⁶ Reproduced in *Sesame Street Newsletter*, August 1970.

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- ²⁷ Cooney, TV Academy interview, 1998.
- ²⁸ Samuel Gibbon and Edward Palmer "Pre-reading on *Sesame Street*", report to Carnegie Corporation, December 1970, Columbia archive, box 33: 1.
- ²⁹ Interview in *Essence* magazine, March 1971.
- ³⁰ Interview in the film *The World According to Sesame Street* (2006).
- ³¹ TV Academy interview, 1998.
- ³² Notes from an early 'goals meeting' (23rd/24th September, 1968) suggested that 'negroes' and whites should be presented 'in roles as everyday people, to show indirectly that color didn't matter': UM/CTW archive box 33: 2.
- ³³ Cited in Morrow, 98.
- ³⁴ Francke, 28, 29.
- ³⁵ *Ebony* magazine, XXV(3), January 1970.
- ³⁶ Writers' notebook, UM/CTW archive, box 33: 20.
- ³⁷ Summaries of episode 362, aired 1972: UM/CTW archive, box 33: 26.
- ³⁸ Lesser, *Children and Television*, 94.
- ³⁹ Cited in Morrow, 153.
- ⁴⁰ Davis, 24
- ⁴¹ Memo from Jane O'Connor to CTW staff, UM/CTW archive, box 35: 47.
- ⁴² Long, PhD thesis, 83-4.
- ⁴³ Stewart, Barbara H. 'Sesame Street: A Linguistic Detour for Black-Language Speakers', *Black World*. August 1973.
- ⁴⁴ UM/CTW archive, box 36: 49.
- ⁴⁵ Some examples of these letters are cited in Loretta Long's PhD thesis; and see also Davis, 202.
- ⁴⁶ Position paper on cultural diversity, UM/CTW archive, box 35: 6.
- ⁴⁷ See for example the articles by Reimer and Cooper.
- ⁴⁸ For example, Jane Bergman's article 'Are little girls being harmed by "Sesame Street"?' 1/2/1972, and the ensuing debate, for example, 'Do the guys have it all on "Sesame Street"?' 2/20/72.
- ⁴⁹ Cooney, TV Academy interview, 1998.
- ⁵⁰ A recommendation carried over from Cooney's first report for Carnegie, *The Potential Uses of Television...*
- ⁵¹ Cited in Morrow, 96.
- ⁵² TV academy interview, 1998.
- ⁵³ For example, UM/CTW archive, box 34: 7. Of course, it's possible that Cooney was bound to present herself in one way for NOW, and in another way for her (largely male) colleagues.
- ⁵⁴ Letter to Wilma Scott Heide of NOW, April 1972, cited in Davis, 213-5. I've also drawn here on several folders of feminist criticism, and CTW responses, in the UM/CTW archive, box 34.
- ⁵⁵ See Morrow, 154.
- ⁵⁶ These debates are covered in various folders in the UM/CTW archive, especially Box 34.
- ⁵⁷ Morrow, 165.
- ⁵⁸ In 2019, Sara Luterman reported on *Slate* that the show was accused of 'promoting insidious ideas about neurodiverse people': <https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/08/sesame-street-autism-speaks-controversy-julia.html>
- ⁵⁹ Both reports were consulted in UM/CTW archives, box 1.
- ⁶⁰ UM/CTW archive, box 1: 4.

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- ⁶¹ Columbia Carnegie archive, series IIIB: grant reports.
- ⁶² UM/CTW archive, box I.
- ⁶³ Long's PhD is online (see reference list); Polsky's was published as *Getting to Sesame Street*, and his interviews are in the Columbia Oral History Archive.
- ⁶⁴ See, for example, the interviews with Cooney and Morrisett for the TV Academy, 1998 and 2004 respectively; the other video sources from the Paley Center archives; and the quotations in Michael Davis's *Street Gang* (which include some from Jon Stone's unpublished memoir).
- ⁶⁵ This issue is also implicit in John Holt's criticisms, although it's not defined there in terms of 'race'.
- ⁶⁶ Of course, the terms of that debate have changed, but the issues are still with us. In the UK, this is evident in academic books like David Gillborn's *Racism and Education* (London, Routledge, 2008), as well as in more popular accounts, such as Akala's thoughtful *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (London, Two Roads, 2018).
- ⁶⁷ For instance Morrow and Davis.
- ⁶⁸ Columbia Oral History archive, Polsky's interview with Hausman.
- ⁶⁹ 'Cognitivism', as I understand it, is something much broader than the largely behaviourist approach taken from Bereiter and Engelmann, for example – hence my use of inverted commas.
- ⁷⁰ This narrowing of goals is particularly evident in Polsky's account, *Getting to Sesame Street*; and in the grant reports to Carnegie at the end of the programme's first year (Columbia Carnegie archive, series IIIB, box 33).
- ⁷¹ Interview with John Callaway, Paley Center archive B11803.
- ⁷² See Polsky, especially pages 68-76.
- ⁷³ Interview with Polsky, Columbia Oral History archive.
- ⁷⁴ See my essay 'Watching with (and without) mother': link in references section.
- ⁷⁵ This expression comes from Cooney's interview with Polsky in 1972: Columbia Oral History archive. It was still being used in the CTW Newsletter as late as 1978: see UM/CTW archive, box 44: 22. Cooney uses it again in her 1998 TV Academy interview.
- ⁷⁶ Morrow suggests that the difference was not very significant, but a first year CTW report to Carnegie suggests that in some cases the programme was being watched four times as frequently in middle-class homes: see Bruce Samuels, 'The First Year of Sesame Street: A Summary of Audience Surveys', Columbia Carnegie archive, box 33: I. Concerns about this were particularly expressed by Paul Klein, vice president for audience research at NBC, whom CTW had engaged to look at this issue: see Morrow, 142.
- ⁷⁷ Quoted in Francke.
- ⁷⁸ These and the follow-up reports (1973 and 1978) are in the UM/CTW archive, boxes 43 and 44.
- ⁷⁹ According to a footnote in Holt's article, initial sales of the kits were in the region of 60,000.
- ⁸⁰ Quoted in Roger Jellinek, 'Is Sesame Street one way to reading?', *New York Times Book Review*, 20th September 1970.
- ⁸¹ Cited in Davis, 204.
- ⁸² Memo on non-broadcast materials: UM/CTW archive, box 4: 35.
- ⁸³ Overviews of this work can be found in the books edited by Fisch, and Fisch and Truglio. Interestingly, there has been much more research on the issue of 'racial

tolerance' in other international settings than in the US itself. Hendershot (1998, 1999) offers an extensive critique of this approach.

⁸⁴ Memos from Samuel Ball of ETS, and Ball's original proposal to CTW, UM/CTW archive, box 43: 17 and 19.

⁸⁵ 'The First Year of *Sesame Street*: A History and Overview', 1971, p. 14: Columbia Carnegie archive, box 41.

⁸⁶ Quoted in coverage of the debate in *Newsweek*, 24th May 1971.

⁸⁷ Palmer's response was published in *Childhood Education* in 1973, but it is a somewhat shortened version of a paper entitled 'The Deer and the Duck', contained in the UM/CTW archive, box 44.

⁸⁸ The study, 'The Workshop and the World: Toward an Assessment of the CTW', is in the Columbia Carnegie archive, box 33.

⁸⁹ Cook, p. 20.

⁹⁰ Cook, p. 22.

⁹¹ This inconsistency (or ambiguity) had been identified several years earlier by Linda Francke.

⁹² Liebert (1976) offers a useful overview of the debate between Cook and ETS, largely coming down on Cook's side.

⁹³ Cook, 392; my emphasis.

⁹⁴ Lesser, 146,

⁹⁵ TV Academy interview.

⁹⁶ In 1970-71, this activity amounted to 12% of CTW's total budget; and by 1972 its budget apparently amounted to \$1.3 million.

⁹⁷ See Morrow, 114-6.

⁹⁸ Information on this work comes from published sources (especially Morrow and Davis), from Long's PhD thesis, and from the UM/CTW archives (box 51 contains several of the key documents). I have also used an interview with Evelyn Davis in *Essence* magazine, March 1971; an article by Tony Best, 'On the other side of *Sesame Street*', in *American Education* 10(4), May 1974; and a more sceptical account 'Sesame Street – What Next?' from *Library Journal*, November 1970: 3958-3961.

⁹⁹ An evaluation report is contained in UM/CTW archive, box 51: 26.

¹⁰⁰ Press release accessed in the Paley Center microfiche archive; for the 1974 article, see Best, above.

¹⁰¹ UM/CTW archive, e.g. box 219.

¹⁰² Many of these reports from local offices are contained in the UM/CTW archive, along with key documents like a 'National Utilization Program Manual' from 1971-2 (box 232).

¹⁰³ My emphasis: this 'CES Mission Statement' (from about 1977) is in the UM/CTW archive, box 51: 39.

¹⁰⁴ This is particularly apparent from a large glossy brochure called 'Sesame Street in the Community', published by CES in 1971, whose photographs are almost exclusively of African-American children.

¹⁰⁵ Although an early proposal, first mentioned in Cooney's early reports to Carnegie, for a parallel show directed at parents, was dropped – largely, it appears, due to lack of funds.

¹⁰⁶ UM/CTW archive, box 1: 5.

¹⁰⁷ UM/CTW archive, box 232.

¹⁰⁸ 'Sesame Street – What Next?', above.

¹⁰⁹ See Yotive, William and Fisch, Shalom 'The role of *Sesame Street*-based materials in child-care settings', in the book edited by Fisch and Truglio (2001).

¹¹⁰ There is a sample of these newsletters in the UM/CTW archives, for example box 157.

¹¹¹ See Cooney, TV Academy interview, 1998; and Morrisett, TV Academy interview, 2004.

¹¹² See Morrisett, TV Academy interview; the recording of Gerald Lesser's seminar on 'Sesame Street: The First Quarter Century', in the Paley Centre archive, T28082; and the film *The World According to Sesame Street*, 2006, which follows CTW co-productions in Bangladesh, Kosovo and South Africa.

¹¹³ Critical analysis of CTW's work overseas can be found in Hendershot (especially her 1999 article), Jensen and Lustyik (2017), and in Jensen's forthcoming book.

¹¹⁴ Zigler was head of the Office of Child Development in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and director of Head Start: see UM/CTW box 4: 29, and Morrow, 147. Zigler was also a notable supporter of Cook's re-evaluation of the ETS studies, which may partly explain how it came to be funded. Interestingly, Head Start was one of the first of the original funders to withdraw its support for CTW.

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Cooney's initial report, 'Potential Uses...'; and her later report to Carnegie, 'The First Year of *Sesame Street*': Columbia Carnegie archive, series IIIB.

¹¹⁶ Just for comparison, the initial budget for Head Start, which reached less than half a million pre-schoolers in 1967, was \$127 million; the budget for *Sesame Street*, with an audience of around 7 million, was \$8 million: Cooney's report to Carnegie, *The First Year of Sesame Street*, December 1970, Columbia archive series IIIB, box 33: 1.

¹¹⁷ Much of the research in this area is currently informed by 'Critical Race Theory', although this perspective is not uncontroversial. For a US example, see Adrienne Dodson et al. (eds.) *Critical Race Theory in Education* (New York, Routledge, 2016).

¹¹⁸ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/arts/television/sesame-street-middle-east-trauma.html>