

Sweeping the Clouds Away:
How Sesame Street Revolutionized Children's Television

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Individual Documentary
478 Words

I chose the topic of Sesame Street because it is an under-appreciated form of communication. When I heard the topic was communication my mind went straight to children's television. I decided I wanted to create my project on one of the two original educational children's television shows which included Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. After conducting some initial research on both topics, I decided to focus my project on Sesame Street, partially because I watched Sesame Street for countless hours in my childhood, but more importantly because I thought it had a more significant impact on the world.

I started conducting research by looking at several books and articles on the early history of Sesame Street. One of the most useful books was *Sunny Days* by David Kamp. It was a great overview of the history of Sesame Street. I also started watching some of the Classic Sesame Street episodes and took notes on what I saw. I watched an interview with Joan Ganz Cooney that covered her entire Sesame Street experience. I also interviewed Paul Siefken, the CEO and President of Fred Rogers Productions and former director of children's programming for PBS Kids. He's been working in children's television for 25 years and knows rather much about the impact of Sesame Street.

As I researched I became more interested in the impact of Sesame Street on children's emotional health rather than just on their academic readiness for school and found that much had been written on the topic. I began to focus watching Sesame Street on watching these important episodes.

Once my research was complete, I decided that a documentary would be the best way to present this story. I originally thought that a performance would be the best use of my skills. However, once I realized that with a documentary I could include clips from the show, I knew that would be the best way to present this topic. I spent a lot of time looking back over my research and formulating my narration. I then made my documentary using WeVideo, which I had never used before, but with practice I was able to figure out how to blend together photos and video with my narration. I found many clips from the show over the years to include in my project.

My project relates to Communication in History because television was one of the primary methods of communication of the second half of the 20th century. Sesame Street had a huge impact on using that method of communication for the purpose of teaching preschoolers, something which had not previously been done, and which continues to be done today. Additionally, Sesame Street used both muppets and humans to communicate, a practice that was new at the time.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary sources

Cooney, Joan Ganz. Interview by Shirley Wershba, *Television Academy Interviews*, 27 April 1998, [interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/joan-ganz-cooney](https://www.televisionacademy.com/interviews/joan-ganz-cooney). Accessed 15 Feb, 2021.

This interview with Joan Ganz Cooney covered her entire life and career. She extensively discussed creating *Sesame Street*, its impact and challenges and some of the most memorable times from the show. It was extremely helpful in giving a first hand account of *Sesame Street's* early years.

Cooney, Joan Ganz and Lloyd Morrisett, creators. *Sesame Street*. Sesame Workshop, 1969-2021.

I watched several early episodes of *Sesame Street* to better understand the show. I also watched portions of shows which I found through my research to have been very impactful, including the 1982 episode dealing with Mr. Hooper's Death, the 2001 Episode dealing with 9/11 and the 2005 episode dealing with Hurricane Katrina. I included clips from these episodes, and several early episodes in my documentary.

Cooney, Joan Ganz, "Sesame Street Original Pitch Reel." *YouTube* uploaded by OldSchool, 8 Jan. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80_-782Vza4.

This pitch reel was created in 1969 to pitch television stations on carrying the show. It provided me with excellent background material on how *Sesame Street* was created and the goals of the show. I included a clip of the *Sesame Street* team working on the first episode from this Reel in my documentary.

Gardella, Kay. "NET's Sesame Street a Nice Place to Visit." *New York Daily News*, 11 Nov. 1969, p.27.

This review of *Sesame Street* from the day after its first episode aired provided excellent background material on how *Sesame Street* was thought of at the time.

Gunther, Max. "What's Around the Corner for Sesame Street?" *TV Guide*, 10-16 July 1971. pp. 20-25.

This cover article on *Sesame Street's* early years provided background on how *Sesame Street* was perceived at the time. I included a quote from this article and a photo of the first page of the article in my documentary.

Kanfer, Stefan. "Television: Who's Afraid of Big Bad TV?" *Time*, 23 Nov. 1970.

This *Time Magazine* article from only a year after Sesame Street was created gave background on how *Sesame Street* was perceived at the time.

Secondary sources

Armstrong, Neil, 20 July 1969, Photograph. *10 News*,
<https://www.10news.com/re-live-the-apollo-11-moon-landing-through-these-historical-photos>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2021.

Photo of Buzz Aldrin on the moon, for historical context in my documentary.

Associated Press, 9 Aug. 1974, Photograph. *LA Times*,
<https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/archives/la-me-nixon-obituary-23apr94-story.html>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photo of Richard Nixon leaving the White House used for historical context in my documentary.

Baker, Tim, Photograph. *The Fred Rogers Center*,
<https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/2013/05/learning-from-television-kids-do-and-so-can-media-developers/>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photograph of a young boy watching Sesame Street used during my documentary.

Curtin, Frank, 16 Oct. 1965, Photograph. *The Washington Post*,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-civil-rights-and-vietnam-protests-changed-america-today-they-might-be-illegal/2017/09/22/ae57f778-9ed9-11e7-8ea1-ed975285475e_story.html. Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photo of Vietnam war protestors used for historical context in my documentary.

Earth Right Now, Photograph. *NASA*,
<https://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/overview/index.html>, Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photo of Planet Earth used when referencing the world in the documentary.

Emily Kingsly photo, *Aspen Ideas*, <https://www.aspenideas.org/speakers/emily-kingsley>,
Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photo of *Sesame Street* writer Emily Kingsley used when talking about her in my documentary.

Getty, Photograph, *Vintage Inn*,
<http://www.vintageinn.ca/2018/09/back-to-school-we-go-roundup-of-all-things-school-from-the-1940s-50s-and-60s/>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photo of children going off to school used when discussing sending kids to school unprepared.

Guernsey, Lisa, et al. "How Sesame Street Changed the World." *Newsweek*, 23 Oct. 2012, www.newsweek.com/how-sesame-street-changed-world-80067. Accessed 2 Feb. 2021.

This *Newsweek* article gave an excellent overview of both influence and criticism of *Sesame Street*.

Hanna-Barbara, "The Flintstones Shorts: Fred and Barney Bowling" *YouTube*, uploaded by TheCartoonShorts, 1 Mar. 2014,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2FaK4vhLv8>.

Clip from *The Flintstones* used to show the historical context of children's television in the late 60s.

Jim Hensen, the Muppet Master, Photograph.
<https://jimhenson-themuppetmaster.tumblr.com/post/177846336807/jim-henson-performing-ernie-on-sesame-street>, Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Kamp, David. *Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.

This book was an excellent early source in gaining a detailed understanding of how *Sesame Street* was created and the show's influence over time.

Kearney, Melissa and Phillip Levine. "Early Childhood Education by Television: Lessons from *Sesame Street*." *American Economics Journal: Applied Economics*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, 2019, pp 318-350, <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20170300>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

This scholarly article explored the long term benefit of *Sesame Street* on kids' education and later success. It found that kids who watched *Sesame Street* when they were preschoolers were better prepared for school and stayed ahead of those who didn't through high school and beyond. I discussed this study and included a photo of the article in my documentary.

Lepore, Jill. "How We Got to Sesame Street." *The New Yorker*, 4 May 2020,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/11/how-we-got-to-sesame-street>. Accessed 29 Jan 2021.

This excellent article took us through the early history of *Sesame Street* as well as controversy the show faced through the years. It also discussed important episodes of the show and how *Sesame Street* has changed over the years. I found this article to be excellent background material for my understanding of the topic.

Muppet Wiki, Photograph. https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Lloyd_Morrisett. Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

Photo of Sesame Street Founder Lloyd Morrisett with Elmo, used when discussing Morrisett in my documentary.

Nati, Michelle, "How 'Sesame Street' Changed the World in Its 50-Year Lifetime." *FamilyMinded*, www.familyminded.com/s/how-sesame-street-changed-the-world-b43dc10db6304536#:~ Accessed 3 Jan. 2021.

This article was a great overview of all of the most influential episodes of the show. This was extremely useful in deciding which episodes to watch and include in my documentary.

Newton Minnow Photo, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM117697>, Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Portrait of Newton Minnow used when referencing Newton Minnow in my documentary.

Nuvision Federal Credit Union. Photograph. <https://nuvisionfederal.com/blog/blog-post/memberresources/2019/08/09/getting-books-into-the-hands-of-kids>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photograph to show the importance of early literacy skills for preschoolers.

"Our History." *Sesame Workshop*, www.sesameworkshop.org/who-we-are/our-history. Accessed 3 Jan 2021.

This website contained a timeline of the show that was extremely useful in understanding what Sesame Workshop itself considers to be the most important events in the history of the show..

Princeton University Department of History, Photograph,
<https://history.princeton.edu/centers-programs/shelby-cullom-davis-center/themes/past-themes/1969-1973>. Accessed 3 Mar. 2021.

Photograph of a late 1960s classroom used when discussing kids arriving at school prepared.

Sesame Workshop, Photograph, *LA Magazine*,
<https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/jim-henson-30-years-muppets/>, Accessed 2 Mar 2021.

Photo of Jim Hensen used when discussing him in my documentary.

Siefken, Paul, Personal Interview, 24 Feb. 2020.

This interview with current President and CEO of Fred Rogers Productions and former Director of Children's Programming for PBS Kids was extremely informative in giving me understanding of how *Sesame Street* continues to influence those working in children's television today.

"Social Impact Initiatives: Sesame Workshop." *Home*,
www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/social-impact-initiatives. Accessed 3 Jan. 2021.

This website contained excellent information on the show's social impact initiatives.

Tankersley, Jim. "Study: Kids Can Learn as Much from 'Sesame Street' as from Preschool." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 7 June 2015,
www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/sesame-street-and-its-surprisingly-powerful-effects-on-how-children-learn/2015/06/07/59c73fe4-095c-11e5-9e39-0db921c47b93_story.html. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

This article in the Washington Post discussed the study by Melissa Kearney and Phillip Levine referenced above. It explained the results of the study and what that really means in a more understandable way.

University of Arizona, Photograph, <https://arizonaalumni.com/joan-ganz-cooney>.
Accessed 2 Feb. 2021.

Photograph of Sesame Street Founder Joan Ganz Cooney used when discussing her in my documentary.

Vaknin, Gil. "Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett." Photograph, Oct 2019. *Joan Ganz Cooney Center*,
<https://joanganzcooneycenter.org/2019/12/06/the-report-that-started-it-all/>,
Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

Photo of Sesame Street Founders Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett used when discussing these two friends in my documentary.