

Getting from *Sesame Street* to *Sesamstrasse*:
The Development of *Sesame Street*'s International Adaptations, 1970-1978

by

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To the memory of my grandmother, Miriam Thomas (1934-2021)

On May 20th, 1978, a major international conference in Amsterdam drew officials from around the world to discuss one subject – *Sesame Street*. Broadcasting executives, educational experts, and television producers from nations as far afield as Germany, Japan, Kuwait, Kenya, and the United States – among others – were meeting to discuss adapting *Sesame Street* for international audiences.¹ This meeting was not the beginning of a process of adaptation; rather, it was the culmination of nearly a decade of trial and error, experimentation, and expansion of the program. By the end of the 1970s, *Sesame Street*, originally designed for American audiences, had spread all over the world. However, this expansion had required changes to content and format, an evolution reflected in the goals for the Amsterdam Conference laid out by Gerald Lesser, the Children’s Television Workshop’s head educational advisor.² Among the concerns for the conference were finding “ways to make a co-production truly represent a country’s culture” and ensuring “ways to achieve the best mixture of entertainment and education [and] how much to predetermine the educational goals of the series.”³ The aims of the conference were a clear result of the lessons learned from *Sesame Street*’s first attempts at international adaptation in the early 1970s. *Sesame Street* was the first American children’s educational program to reach a worldwide audience, and in doing so, had to develop different versions of the program, address issues of cultural imperialism, overcome cultural and educational conflicts, weigh the benefits of

¹ International Conference on Adaptations of “Sesame Street” Addendum to Roster of Participants by Country, Box 168, International Conference on Adaptations of Sesame Street May 1978, Children’s Television Workshop Archives, Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, College Park.

² In this paper the Children’s Television Workshop will also be referred to by the acronym CTW. The CTW was the producer of *Sesame Street* and other programming such as *The Electric Company*. Now known as Sesame Workshop, they continue to produce *Sesame Street* to this day.

³ International Conference on Adaptation of “Sesame Street” Agenda, Box 168, International Conference on Adaptations of Sesame Street May 1978, CTW Archives.

direct exportation versus local adaptation, and outline a new model for broadcasting with the introduction of international co-production.

Fully understanding the importance of these developments requires an examination of *Sesame Street*'s original American production, its educational model, and its immediate popularity. American television prior to *Sesame Street* had not catered to children's educational needs. Television in the United States was a devolved and commercialized medium dominated by broadcasters and their profit motives, not any unified social or educational program subject to state oversight. As children were not themselves significant consumers, broadcasters did not prioritize children's programming, a part of what led to Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow's declaration in 1961 that television had become a "vast wasteland."⁴ Historian Stephen Kline has described this wasteland for children as dominated by cartoons and puppet shows that were both simplistic and repeatable, yet still entertaining, a natural result for an audience with limited buying power in a commercialized environment.⁵ Even though children in the 1950s flocked to the new medium of television, they were still not seen by major broadcasters as targets for advertising, and were thus marginalized in program planning. This is not to say that their television was not still rife with advertisements, as companies like Mattel introduced toys connected to television programs and shows like *Howdy Doody* aimed at very young children released branded merchandise.⁶ Thus, what children's programming did exist was driven by advertisers and commercial interests, not by educators. The incessant

⁴ Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing* (London: Verso Books, 1993), 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 120-130.

⁶ Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 153-158; Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 32-33.

commercialization of children's television, and of broadcasting more broadly, was unique to the United States. Unlike countries in the Soviet bloc which had state-controlled broadcasting, or countries like the United Kingdom that subsidized public broadcasting through the BBC, the United States before 1967 had no organized, national system of public broadcasting.⁷

Without public broadcasting, *Sesame Street* would not have been made. An explicitly non-commercial show aimed at education did not serve the profit motives of the national broadcasters, and as a result, there had been no attempt at explicitly educational children's programming before it. By the late 1960s, Minow's "wasteland" had not improved, and nor had the quality of programming more broadly. It was this need for quality educational programming aimed at both children and adults which led to the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act (PBA) in 1967, setting out structures and allocating funds for governmental support of educational programming.⁸ In addition to governmental action, private actors and public foundations had similarly begun to develop explicitly educational programming; even though *Sesame Street* would not debut until 1969, its beginnings predate the PBA and can be traced to 1966. The Carnegie Corporation, one of the largest philanthropic organizations in the United States, had become focused on the issue of childhood education and childhood poverty, sponsoring a commission on the subject, and giving financial support to organizations addressing these issues. Lloyd Morrisett, an official at Carnegie, gave life to *Sesame Street* through discussions with

⁷ Katalin Lustyik, "From a Socialist Endeavor to a Commercial Enterprise: Children's Television in East-Central Europe," Imre Anikó, Timothy Havens, and Katalin Lustyik, eds., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, Routledge Advances in Internationalizing Media Studies 9 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 105-122; David Oswell, *Television, Childhood, and the Home: A History of the Making of the Child Television Audience in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 21-45.

⁸ James Day, *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 145-148.

Joan Ganz Cooney, a television producer, and the future chairwoman of the CTW.⁹ From this initial meeting Cooney worked with Carnegie, making contacts with other organizations and with governmental bodies that enthusiastically signed on to the idea of educational children's programming. The first step in the show's development was a feasibility study undertaken by Cooney, outlining a plan for a program that "foster[ed] the intellectual and cultural development of young children" and which had "many of the production values (meaning pace, humor, professional performing talent, film inserts, animation, and so forth) to which today's young children have become accustomed." It would not be enough to simply produce educational television. Cooney presciently argued for a program that combined educational *and* entertaining television, a combination that would allow for *Sesame Street*'s world-pacing success.¹⁰

The Children's Television Workshop was itself a novelty in American television broadcasting, a production company receiving both public and private funding with a priority not on profits, but on education. Even before *Sesame Street* developed as a concept, the CTW was created with the purpose of addressing the educational "wasteland" of children's television through the newly created national public broadcasting stations. Cooney's proposal outlining the goals of the CTW reflected an interest in social justice, arguing that the goal of any program they produced must seek to address educational gaps in young children and use the television screen as a preparation for, or substitute for, preschool.¹¹ Such an ambitious goal found support from the government and from socially-minded foundations, like the aforementioned Carnegie

⁹ Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 232-234.

¹⁰ Joan Ganz Cooney cited in Richard M. Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street: Origins of the Children's Television Workshop* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 10-11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

Corporation, who combined to contribute over eight million dollars to the program.¹² Thus, unlike most non-commercial, and largely local, educational broadcasters who were subject to strict budgetary and time constraints, the CTW was given ample funding and over 18 months to develop *Sesame Street*.¹³

Having established a production studio and secured funding to create an educational and entertaining program with high-budget production values, the CTW's next priority was creating a model for empirically researched children's television. The model, or in other words, the curriculum, was an explicit outlining of *Sesame Street*'s educational goals developed through a series of seminars in the summer of 1968. Bringing together educators and television officials to work on finding a balance between education and entertainment, these seminars produced "The Instructional Goals of Children's Television Workshop." Ranging from the ability to recognize numbers and letters, visual discrimination between objects, to more abstract concepts, like the relationship between the child and the physical environment, the social environment, and social interactions, the "Instructional Goals" were the most academically rigorous program for children's television ever created.¹⁴ Importantly, the goals were not designed to be static, but to

¹² Polsky provides a detailed breakdown of the funding in *Getting to Sesame Street*. The five largest donors to the program were the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Office of Education (\$3,325,000), the Ford Foundation (\$1,538,000), the Carnegie Corporation (\$1,500,000), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (\$625,900), and the HEW's Office of Economic Opportunity (\$650,000). Altogether the show's first season received \$8,191,700 in funding. *Ibid.*, 114.

¹³ Langemann, *The Politics of Knowledge*, 234-235.

¹⁴ One of the participants at these seminars was the children's author and illustrator Maurice Sendak. Lesser includes some of Sendak's doodles made during the discussions in his book. These subversive sketches contrast the educational content of the meetings and the resulting goals. For example, in the section of visual discrimination and labeling body parts Sendak's doodle shows naked children looking at each other. Lesser, *Children and Television*, 62-74.

be continually updated, which they were both domestically, and, later, through international adaptation.¹⁵

Much of the literature that examines children's television in general and *Sesame Street* in particular focuses on this founding period. Historians and media scholars alike have examined the show's development, with particular attention on the funding for the show and the development of its educational model. Educator Richard Polsky has provided systematic coverage of the show's development from 1966 to 1968, where he argues that the show's success was a result of clear planning, talented officials, sufficient funding, and having been created in a time of social change.¹⁶ Gerald Lesser, a Harvard Child Psychologist and educational advisor to the CTW drew very similar conclusions in *Children and Television*, a history of the show which emphasizes the importance of the educational model and the process of its development.¹⁷ Much discussion of *Sesame Street*, by historians and by educators, concerns the "model" of educational development that shaped the program's mission and production.¹⁸ Beyond the "model," the show's pioneering role in public broadcasting is also discussed. The American debut of *Sesame Street* was met with immediate critical acclaim and widespread popularity. James Day, a long-time television executive, described the show's premiere as having been an overdue yet momentous occasion; it was a rigorously tested, financially supported, and publicly popular

¹⁵ Charlotte F. Cole, Beth A. Richman Susan, A. McCann Brown, "The World of *Sesame Street* Research," in Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio, eds., *G is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street* (Mahwah, N.J.: Routledge, 2000), 147-148.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89-106.

¹⁷ Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975)

¹⁸ A more extensive analysis of the CTW model and its educational impacts may be found in Gerald S. Lesser and Joel Schneider, "Creation and Evolution of the *Sesame Street* Curriculum," in Fisch and Truglio, eds., *G Is for Growing*, 25-38.

endeavor that was long needed and pointed directly to the importance of public broadcasting.¹⁹

In a similar vein, historian Robert Morrow praised the show for its championing of a new approach to children's television but lamented the lack of large-scale reform in the wake of its debut; *Sesame Street*, he argued, for all of its laudable characteristics, remained a unique, if very popular, part of the American television landscape.²⁰

Sesame Street's immediate popularity was vital to its rapid overseas expansion. The adoption of the program into foreign contexts reveals the complicated dynamics of cultural exchange across national borders. Herbert Schiller and other scholars of American mass communication and cultural expansion use the term "cultural imperialism" to describe a one-way imposition of American ideals into other cultural contexts; instead of a process of negotiations between cultures, American values are said to supersede native ones and replace native culture.²¹ Not all scholars agree with this view of cultural domination. Other scholarship, like that of Richard Pells's discussion of Europe, examines the global spread of American culture as a process of transmission or exchange; instead of submission there is a "cross-fertilization" of American and global cultures into a new culture and set of values.²² *Sesame Street*'s international adaptation was a clear example of the latter process. Initial overtures for international expansion came not from the CTW, but from foreign producers and officials in countries like Britain,

¹⁹ Day, *The Vanishing Vision*, 169.

²⁰ Robert W. Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2006.

²¹ Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 111-134; Herbert I. Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 123-136.

²² Richard Pells, "American Culture Abroad: The European Experience Since 1945," in *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe*, ed. By Rob Kroes, Robert W. Rydell, D. F. J. Bosscher, and John F. Sears (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993), 67-84.

Germany, and Mexico.²³ From the foreign requests onwards, the CTW adapted the program with a focus on the foreign viewer, which ultimately led to the excision of “American” content and eventually creation of the co-production model that gave greater autonomy to foreign producers.

The development of the co-production model came in stages. The earliest attempts to export *Sesame Street* focused on English-speaking countries, and the controversy over expansion in the United Kingdom will be addressed in detail. Learning from that experience, the CTW then created “Open Sesame,” a project that created culturally neutral versions of the program that could be dubbed and exported around the world, stripped of explicitly American content. From this version came the international co-productions, with Mexico and Germany being two focuses of this paper. The former was the first fully international co-production, and the latter an evolution of a “Open Sesame” project into a full-fledged co-production. Co-production was inspired by the CTW’s educational model: experimentation and research revealed what worked and what did not with the aim of creating an entertaining and informative product. To date, history of *Sesame Street*’s international adaptation has existed only in anecdotal form. This paper seeks to connect *Sesame Street* to the broader experience of American cultural diffusion and shed light on processes not yet subject to historical analysis.

The export of *Sesame Street* to the United Kingdom revealed early growing pains in the CTW’s international model. It was there where the earliest, and one of the most prominent, conflicts over international adaptation occurred. Although the history of this expansion has been misconstrued, narratives about the UK experience shaped subsequent attempts to bring *Sesame*

²³ Cole, “The World of *Sesame Street* Research,” 148.

Street to international audiences.²⁴ The version of *Sesame Street* first pitched to the BBC was not adapted for British audiences but was unchanged from the American version. After several months of negotiations, the program was rejected by the BBC because of its “authoritarian” teaching style which emphasized one correct answer to questions.²⁵ While the rejection by Monica Sims, the BBC’s director of children’s programming at the time, was certainly a challenge, histories of the program have yet to address the circumstances that the lead up to the rejection, nor have they considered the consequences of the rejection in depth.²⁶ CTW archival materials complicate the story and shed light on the conclusions that were drawn from the controversy, leading to changes in future adaptations to other nations.

Expansion of *Sesame Street* into the United Kingdom was not driven solely by the CTW. As early as February 1970 – only three months after the show’s US premiere – BBC officials (including Sims) were in discussions with the CTW about purchasing the show as a complement to *Play School* and *Blue Peter*, the BBC’s two flagship children’s programs.²⁷ Discussions regarding the BBC purchasing *Sesame Street* continued throughout 1970, with tapes sent over in April, and in the summer with Sims informing the CTW that “we would not wish to show the whole program in Britain because we felt it was too specifically geared to an American audience

²⁴ James Day’s *The Vanishing Vision* is one history which references the UK conflict over *Sesame Street* but does not tell the whole, or even a fully accurate version, of the story. Day, *The Vanishing Vision*, 163.

²⁵ “BBC Doesn’t Buy ‘Sesame,’” *Washington Post*, September 8, 1971, pg. B10.

²⁶ Monica Sims, OBE, was the first female executive at the BBC, first working in radio before taking over children’s television. In the 1960s, she broke “taboos by broadcasting provocative items about women’s physical and mental health, religious doubts, financial difficulties ... and sexual orientation,” before moving to children’s television and eventually becoming director of radio programming in 1983. Despite her many achievements, her rejection of *Sesame Street* became a key part of her biography. See, for example, Anne Karpf, “Monica Sims Obituary,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/nov/30/monica-sims-obituary>

²⁷ John Fitzgerald to David Connell, February 4, 1970, Box 185, BBC Correspondence, General, 1970, CTW Archives.

and also in some ways overlaps with Play School.” Sims went on to write that “we are interested in the entertainment provided by the programmes rather than its formal teaching content and I am sure ‘The Muppets’ would be greatly appreciated here by both children and adults.”²⁸

The insistence on only wanting to purchase only entertainment – not educational content – was revealing because Sims later linked her rejection of the program to its educational model. In the summer of 1971, a memo written by Sims was sent to press correspondents outlining why she had decided to block the BBC from purchasing the program. After opening with an acknowledgement of the Muppets’ “sardonic humor” and concluding that the program would be better suited for five to eleven year-olds, she turned to the main cause of the rejection: “the educational content of the programme and its effect on very young children.”²⁹ Buttressing her attack on the educational quality of *Sesame Street*, Sims cited a series of American and British critics of the program, using their words to allege that the show distorted reality by suggesting “that learning is always easy and fun”; additionally, Sims expressed concerns about *Sesame Street*’s impact on native programming:

One danger of the proliferation of a single-formula package deal is that “Sesame Street”’s claim to teach letters and numbers may succeed in swamping the development of the individual national programmes based on the indigenous culture of each country and although some British objections to the American vocabulary and accent do not seem to me important I am concerned about the trans-atlantic attitudes embodied in the programme and its authoritarian intentions.³⁰

²⁸ Monica Sims to David Connell, August 17, 1970, Box 185, BBC Correspondence, General, 1970, CTW Archives.

²⁹ When citing documents written in British-English I have retained the original spellings. Monica Sims, “Sesame Street,” September 7, 1971, 1, Box 185, BBC – Monica Sims – Background and Clippings, 1971, CTW Archives.

³⁰ Sims, “Sesame Street,” 5, CTW Archives.

Beyond the educational content of the program, she further attacked the “middle-class” values of *Sesame Street* in a program which she saw as designed for viewers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Sims argued that *Sesame Street*’s targeting of disadvantaged communities was mere pandering, and that the program’s educational methodology was nothing but cover for the broadcasting of “white middle-class values to an audience ill-equipped to question. To decorate a street with dirty walls and dustbins as a self-conscious sop to the other half does not constitute communication with a child whose interest in the street where he lives is how to go about the difficult and interesting process of living in it.”³¹ In sum, the success of the program, in her view, was because it was “about the only children’s programme which has been given a large amount of money and production effort” in the United States, contrasting the long-standing commitment of the BBC to children’s broadcasting.³² Her memo attacked the show for its educational content and structure, and she made reference to fears of cultural imperialism. However, in the wake of her rejection it became clear that the British public, and even the BBC’s leadership, did not entirely agree with Ms. Sims.

The CTW quickly found itself embroiled in media controversy in Britain following Sims’s rejection. However, a BBC ban did not end the prospects for *Sesame Street* in Britain, as the Independent Television Authority (ITA), a commercial competitor to the BBC, purchased rights to broadcast the show beginning in early 1972. Following the BBC’s ban, press coverage in the UK sharply rejected Sims’s characterization of the show’s authoritarian nature. In *The Times*, Nigel Lawson described *Sesame Street* as “a minor miracle,” popular with parents and children, but anathema to the educational establishment because of its deterministic educational

³¹ Sims, “Sesame Street,” CTW Archives, 6.

³² Sims, “Sesame Street,” CTW Archives, 9.

style.³³ Another article praising the ITA for purchasing the program questioned why education officials sought to block the one American program of educational quality being exported into Britain.³⁴ Similar sentiments were evident in a *TV Guide* article following ITA's initial run of programs titled "In England, nobody loves Sesame Street ... but the people."³⁵ Again Sims's characterization of *Sesame Street*'s authoritarianism and "middle-class" values came under fire, with viewers, educators, and Joan Ganz Cooney herself questioning the logic of the BBC's decision. Through press coverage it was clear that the battle over *Sesame Street* had become a proxy war for a larger cultural battle in Britain over the methods of modern education and the influence of American culture: on the one side was a public in favor, on the other was the educational establishment against the program. While fears of American cultural and educational dominance contributed to the BBC's refusal to air the program, the public's desire to have access to the program and make it a part of British educational and television culture drove support for *Sesame Street*. The contested nature of *Sesame Street*'s expansion into the UK emphasizes the challenges of cultural exchange when the cultural product is not adapted, but simply exported. While it had public support, to some, the program was an unwelcome intrusion of American culture and teaching styles into the British context.

After the initial run of *Sesame Street* programs by the ITA, they commissioned a study to gauge the show's popularity, the results of which are summarized in "Reactions to Sesame Street in Britain." This report brought together discussion of the ITA's decision to purchase *Sesame*

³³ "The Minor Miracle of Sesame Street," *The Times*, December 22, 1971, Box 185, Clippings, CTW Archives.

³⁴ "Reopening Sesame Street," Box 185, Clippings, CTW Archives.

³⁵ "In England, Nobody Loves Sesame Street ... but the People," *TV Guide*, March 11, 1972, Box 185, Clippings, CTW Archives.

Street, surveys of children's programming in Britain, and extensive research into learning outcomes and viewer responses to the program. Acknowledging that, as Sims argued, the style of education in Britain was more "unstructured" and that educational children's television already existed, the report still concluded that the best test for *Sesame Street* in Britain was to air it.³⁶ From these initial broadcasts, researchers approached British audiences much like the CTW had with American audiences in the program's initial development. In this case, the broad categories of questions were two-fold: How effective were the show's teaching elements? And, how applicable was the show's American design to a British context?³⁷ Overall, the researchers found that children were most engaged by the Muppet segments – except for Bert and Ernie – and were less interested in segments involving characters like Susan and Gordon.³⁸ These findings indicated to the CTW that when exporting *Sesame Street* abroad, sections of the program containing explicitly American content, as the social dynamics of Susan and Gordon and other human characters display, were less effective as educational tools in foreign contexts.

In addition to surveying children as they watched the show, ITA also distributed questionnaires to gauge the popularity of the initial run. After the continued controversy launched by the BBC's ban, these responses gave a clear consensus to the public verdict. Much like the *TV Guide*'s article, no one loved *Sesame Street* but the people. Ninety-eight percent of parental responses from London were in favor of the show continuing beyond its initial run, 98% found it enjoyable, and 92% thought it would assist their children preparing for school. However,

³⁶ Reactions to Sesame Street in Britain, 1971, ITA, 7-9, Box 185, Reactions to Sesame Street in Britain (Parts 1 & 2), 1971, CTW Archives.

³⁷ Ibid., 15

³⁸ One of the segments studied by researchers featured James Earl Jones reading the alphabet and feigning forgetfulness. While the children engaged with this, they "were reticent when confronted with the pronunciation of Z as Zee," rather than Zed, as the letter is pronounced in the UK. Ibid., 16-17.

43% of Londoners and 64% of Welsh viewers thought the show was “too American,” and 31% and 43% of viewers from those respective regions thought the show should have “less Americanisms.”³⁹ Beyond the structured questionnaire responses, the report also included excerpts from unsolicited letters, parents who felt compelled to write to the network about the program. Most letters praised *Sesame Street*, and even those who criticized the program also commended some aspects of the program. One such letter criticized the show’s use of American slang but applauded its ability to “transcend cultural barriers.”⁴⁰ These responses included a letter from Felicity Bolton, the Honorary Secretary of the House of Commons Working Group on Education for the Eradication of Colour Prejudice, in which she wrote after ITA extended *Sesame Street*’s run:

We fully realize that there are legitimate criticisms of the programme, but are sure that many aspects of *Sesame Street* may give ideas to our own producers, particularly the treatment of race, and we hope very much that finance will be forthcoming to have a British programme in the foreseeable future.⁴¹

Viewer responses and journalistic vitriol gave credence to the BBC’s blunder, and ITA’s success, in airing *Sesame Street* for British audiences. While granting that the show was in some cases too American, viewers had, by and large, embraced the program. This extremely negative reaction led BBC executives to attempt to limit the damage, even if they were by then unable to

³⁹ The ITA was at this time made up of regional broadcasters – ITV stations – that were tied to regions, hence why the responses were reported in this manner. Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰ Not all letters came from parents, as ITA included the “shortest” letter they received from a Welsh viewer: “I am writing to say that I enjoy *Sesame Street*. I am five years old and run home from school to watch it. Love, Paul Manning.” Ibid., 41,43.

⁴¹ The Working Group was established in 1970 and had membership from all parties. Its stated aim was to promote racial equality in British education. By 1973 the group had been disbanded due to lack of funds and acceptance of some of its proposals. House of Commons: Working Group on Education for the Eradication of Colour Prejudice, 1970-1973, BEM/4/1/2/1, Black Education Movement Archives, The George Padmore Institute, <https://catalogue.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/records/BEM/4/1/2>; Reactions to *Sesame Street* in Britain, 42, CTW Archives.

acquire the program for themselves. At the CTW and BBC's behest, Monica Sims issued a "correction" to her original memo, refuting her original arguments and pointing out the positives of *Sesame Street*.⁴² This revised memo went point-by-point through her original claims and replaced them with information "provided" by the CTW regarding the program and its expansion into new markets.⁴³ One point of note is a quote from Joan Cooney in the original memo that "like the British Empire, the sun will never set on Sesame Street," which Sims acknowledged in her correction was said humorously. This correction was followed by Sims's mention of there not yet being foreign-language versions of *Sesame Street*; they were to be forthcoming and would be created with input from educators in those countries they are to be produced in.⁴⁴ Even though this correction did not change the situation, it is an important part of the history that has not been mentioned previously, providing further evidence of the complicated and contested nature of *Sesame Street*'s expansion into Britain.⁴⁵ The conflict between the BBC, the CTW, and the public highlighted the difficulties of direct exportation of American programs into foreign contexts. This first foray was a learning moment, one which drove the CTW towards the path of adaptation in the years to come.

⁴² Michael Dann to Huw Weldon, November 12, 1971, Box 185, BBC Correspondence, General, 1971, CTW Archives.

⁴³ Sims prefaced the memo by saying: "It has been brought to my attention by the Children's Television Workshop, that the paper contained several errors of fact which placed the Sesame Street experiment in an unduly harsh light. In the interests of fairness, I am sending this note to those of you who received my original document, and I hope that your perusal of it will help present a more balanced picture of the American series and its aims and achievements." Monica Sims Memo to Broadcasters, 1, Box 185, BBC – Monica Sims – Background and Clippings, 1971, CTW Archives.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ Michael Davis in his "*Complete History of Sesame Street*," includes mention of Sims's memo and ITV's purchase of the program but does not provide any further details. Archival materials complicate and flesh out the story far beyond what has been told so far. Davis, *Street Gang*, 211.

The experience in the United Kingdom offered several lessons to executives at the Children's Television Workshop. Most fundamentally, the CTW understood that future expansion would require a new approach. Rather than simply exporting American programs, or dubbing them into a native language, new versions of the show would need to be created to best serve viewers around the world. It was from this idea that "Open Sesame" was born. The concept was simple: international versions of *Sesame Street* would henceforth be stripped of American cultural signifiers but would retain core educational elements. Planning for "Open Sesame" began in earnest in 1973. On July 2nd of that year, a meeting was held by Edward Palmer, the CTW's research director, to discuss pressing questions about the project's implementation. These were both logistic and conceptual, ranging from the amount of content needed to launch the series, to interaction with educational officials in other countries, and the addition of content by native producers.⁴⁶ The priorities laid out by the CTW make clear that the goal of the "Open Sesame" model was not to be an imposition of an American program, but a collaborative process between the CTW and producers in other countries. Adaptation in the avoidance of claims of "Americanisms" had clearly been learned from the British experience. This process suggested the dynamic nature of cultural exchange.

For the Children's Television Workshop's leaders, the most important element of "Open Sesame" was its emphasis on maintaining the extensively researched and tested educational model. The learning model could be adjusted to fit around the world and in many cultural contexts. In practice, this meant making the lessons more "neutral" by removing street scenes and other "American" signifiers and by shortening the length of programs from an hour to 27

⁴⁶ From Edward Palmer to Jack Vaughn, Norton Wright, Lutrelle Horne, Trish Hayes, Gretchen Bock, Eileen Bohn, Reference Notes for July 2 meeting on "Open Sesamo [sic]," July 2, 1973, Box 168, Open Sesame, CTW Archives. The archival copy has a handwritten acknowledgment of the titular misspelling.

minutes, leaving in place only the core pedagogical elements.⁴⁷ Visual discrimination of letters, one of the core parts of the *Sesame Street* curriculum, would remain a centerpiece of the program but local productions had leeway to institute but have important changes. Lessons involving letters not used in all markets – W, J, K, X, Y – would be eliminated from the program, and all other letters would be given equal coverage without emphasis on sequential order to facilitate local differences.⁴⁸ Numeric lessons had to undergo less adaptation, as counting could be easily adapted to other countries in a way phonetic language could not. Other aspects of the *Sesame Street* curriculum – visual and auditory discrimination, classification of objects, problem solving, and segments concerning social relations, such as those about the child in relation to the family and the world – were also deemed neutral enough to be included in the plan for the program. The top targets laid out by the CTW for “Open Sesame” were mainly European markets but included countries from around the world; some of these were Sweden, Holland, France, Japan, Iran, Yugoslavia, and India.⁴⁹ From these discussions came the formal proposal for “Open Sesame.” The show was *Sesame Street* with the “street scenes” deleted, with a focus on Muppet sketches and animated segments, and “void of any specific U.S. cultural references and values.” In short, including only “the best of *Sesame Street* ethnically-free material” while maintaining the primary focus on the educational curriculum.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Suggested Guidelines for Open Sesame Tapes, August 2, 1973, Box 168, Open Sesame, CTW Archives.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ The Guidelines listed eighteen countries in order of highest potentiality for expansion. The seven listed were first, second, third, sixth, eleventh, thirteenth, and sixteenth respectively. Ibid.

⁵⁰ The Children’s Television Workshop Presents Open Sesame, Box 168, Open Sesame, CTW Archives. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze whether “Open Sesame” was truly culturally neutral, or whether that is possible. Some, like Theodor Adorno, argue that television’s reflection of mass culture leads to a psychological impact on the viewer reinforcing dominant attitudes regardless of the goals of the program’s creators. For the purposes of this paper assessment will be drawn based off written records in the archives, as episodes of the

Having set out a framework by which *Sesame Street* could adapt to new contexts and not simply remain a direct American export, CTW officials were then faced with the next pressing question: how to ensure that the educational quality of the respective programs was upheld in its new forms. The answer was found in a system of review of programming produced in foreign countries. Review of the broadcast material would be performed by the foreign broadcasters themselves in conjunction with educational advisors in that country designated by the CTW. These advisors were tasked with maintaining educational standards, while simultaneously adapting language to local contexts and therefore maximizing the effectiveness of the programs. While the pilot episode of a broadcast was to be of the highest importance for review, periodic review of following episodes – whether every fifth episode or by some other count – would also help ensure the effectiveness of a given adaptation.⁵¹ Crucially, these advisory boards were not intended to answer directly to the CTW, nor were they to be given direct funding by that body, only by native broadcasters in the aim of preserving independence. This was so the series could flourish in countries which were “nationalistic, independent and touchy about anything even slightly suggestive of imperialism” and prevent the imparting of American values onto native productions.⁵² These considerations point to the CTW’s learning from the British conflict over the program and an explicit desire to avoid the export of American culture to foreign contexts,

programs are not easily available. Regarding Adorno’s theory of television, see Theodor Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” *The Culture Industry*, (New York: Routledge Classics, 1991).

⁵¹ Details of CTW’s recommendations listed above may be found in Educational Quality Control of “Open Sesame” Series, Box 168, Open Sesame, CTW Archives.

⁵² Another issue raised was whether CTW would require an educational advisor to speak English to help facilitate communication. It was decided that this expectation was unreasonable given the disparities in English fluency across target countries, and the requirement became a mere recommendation. Educational Quality Control, Box 168; Edward L. Palmer, Milton Chen, and Gerald S. Lesser, “Sesame Street: Patterns of International Adaptation,” *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2, (Spring 1976): 112.

instead approaching the project through neutrality so that the programs could blend into new cultures.

As “Open Sesame” had moved from idea to practice, the CTW sought partners with international broadcasters. The project’s early successes came most prominently in Europe, where adaptations of the program were launched quickly, such as Spain’s *Abrete Sésamo*, the Netherlands’s *Sesamstraat*, Sweden’s *Sesam*, Germany’s *Sesamstrasse* and France’s *Bonjour Sésame*. These proved popular, with foreign press reaction mirroring that of the American media upon *Sesame Street*’s original debut in 1969: ebullient praise. A French-Canadian journalist posed the rhetorical question following *Sésame*’s premier, “*Si cette série est si bonne pourquoi n’en avons-nous pas bien avant?*” (If this series is so good, why didn’t we have it long before?)⁵³ France’s TF1 station provided coverage of the show’s debut on its network and included a quote from Lutrelle Horne at the CTW attesting that the show was “independent of a specific culture” and was one of many versions of the program spreading around the world.⁵⁴ The *Göteborgs-Posten*, a Swedish newspaper, heralded the launch of *Sesam* as the arrival of “the world’s most appreciated children’s TV show today” and emphasized the importance the show placed on

⁵³ Press clippings were reprinted in an internal CTW newsletter that did not always provide full citation information. What information is available is included. Pierrette Deslandes, “Sésame: la voix de L’Amérique nous parle en Français,” in News: Some Reactions by editors in Europe and the Western Hemisphere to the New International Versions of Sesame Street, Box 168, Open Sesame, CTW Archives.

⁵⁴ “Bonjour Sesame: Un Emission Ancienne des Rondez-vous Nouveaux” in News: Some Reactions by editors in Europe and the Western Hemisphere to the New International Versions of Sesame Street, Box 168, CTW Archives.

appealing to underprivileged children and its educational record.⁵⁵ Most succinctly, a Spanish newspaper declared “Sesame Street, finally in Spain!”⁵⁶

Judging by the press reaction, there was clear excitement at the introduction of “Open Sesame” adaptations, a reaction which justifies the collaborative expansion between the CTW and foreign educators and broadcasters who sought out the show. To assess the longer-term interest in the program, Swedish broadcasters commissioned a study about *Sesam* which was forwarded on to the CTW. This study compared the impacts and popularity of *Sesam* to the Swedish-produced, *Five Ants are More than Four Elephants*, an educational series explicitly inspired by *Sesame Street* in the aim of reducing childhood achievement gaps.⁵⁷ Interestingly, *Sesame Street*’s structure was strongly contrasted to *Five Ants*, describing the former’s rapid pace being a result of *Sesame Street*’s need to appeal to the American commercial environment, much unlike conditions in Sweden which do not have “the same need to make the programs entertaining” and leading to the conclusion that, to a Swedish audience, *Sesam* is far more entertainment than education.⁵⁸ When comparing the two programs, the study found that children and parents responded positively to them both, but more so to *Five Ants*. The study’s conclusions may be summarized in short: “As entertainment programs [*Sesam*] functions beautifully, but if

⁵⁵ The quoted phrase is “*Sesame Street* är konkurrens världens mest uppskattade barn- TV program idag.” in “Brasse, Magnus och deras myror i all ara Nu Kommer Sesam,” October 31, 1975, *Göteborgs-Posten* in News: Some Reactions by editors in Europe and the Western Hemisphere to the New International Versions of Sesame Street, Box 168, CTW Archives.

⁵⁶ The picture attached to the article features a promotional photo of Bert and Ernie, who were “Blas y Epi” in *Abrete Sésamo*. Jose Antonio de Las Heras “¡Abrete, Sésamo! Por Fin en España,” in News: Some Reactions by editors in Europe and the Western Hemisphere to the New International Versions of Sesame Street, Box 168, CTW Archives.

⁵⁷ Leni Filipson, *Sesam*, 2, in Sweden – “Open Sesame” from Sarah Frank to Peter Orton, Lutrelle Horne, Dave Connell, Ed Palmer, and Frank Leuci, Box 168, Open Sesame, CTW Archives.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

the purpose is to accomplish more serious objectives, clearly a completely Swedish-produced series – which can be directly adjusted to Swedish needs and conditions – is better.”⁵⁹

The Swedish reaction – enjoyment tinged with concern – suggested to CTW leaders that the “Open Sesame” model may not have solved all the challenges involved in exporting *Sesame Street* overseas. If the case of *Sesam* was to hold across other contexts, the CTW needed to consider yet another approach if it wanted to maximize the effectiveness of international adaptations. While the “Open Sesame” model offered many advantages over direct export of American content, it was still imperfect. Hoping to cater to foreign viewers more fully led the CTW to embrace a third model, international co-productions. The development of the co-production model out of “Open Sesame” is a clear example of the CTW’s learning and collaborative approach to the idea of international adaptations. Understanding the shortcomings of the so-called “neutral” model, CTW leaders came to the logical conclusion that the best course of action would be to launch programs explicitly targeted towards international audiences and produced through cooperation with foreign broadcasters. Expansion was not a one-way street, but a collaborative process.

The new co-production model went beyond “Open Sesame” by enabling foreign producers to create their own content, characters, and settings. While co-production became the dominant model for *Sesame Street* adaptation in the late 1970s, Mexico’s *Plaza Sésamo*, the first co-production, debuted concurrently with “Open Sesame” adaptations. Like *Sesame Street*, this project was seen by the CTW as both an important research opportunity, and as a tool for social

⁵⁹ The character that resonated most with children in the study was Cookie Monster, or as he was known in Sweden, Kakmäns. This study’s author questioned whether that association was good, “since the function of the Cooky Monster in the program is more destructive than constructive.” Ibid., 13.

improvement; as a result, the project received funding from Xerox and the Ford Foundation, who bankrolled more ambitious aims for the program.⁶⁰ It was through this financial support that the CTW began to develop a program for Spanish-speaking international audiences, as well as a separate Portuguese language program for Brazilian audiences titled *Vila Sésamo* that would be far more independent than adaptations in the “Open Sesame” model.

“Open Sesame” was predicated on the idea of a “neutral” program, one that would serve the educational needs of foreign audiences without clear attribution of American cultural values or signifiers deemed to reflect American life too closely. In contrast, *Plaza Sésamo* (produced under the co-production model and aired beginning in 1973) sought to ground the program’s content *within* foreign contexts. One of the most concrete impacts of the “neutral” approach was the lack of street scenes in programs like *Bonjour Sesame* or *Sesam*, as the CTW felt that the titular street was a tie to an American context that would not necessarily relate to European viewers.⁶¹ For *Plaza Sésamo*, a radically different approach was taken. Instead of eliminating the street, producers would re-imagine it, hence the transition from street to plaza in the program’s title. The tight street evoking images of New York would be replaced by “a small, urban plaza” with mountains in its background, and which featured “a fountain, benches ... a corner store” and badly paved streets: “In general, the plaza, street, and buildings look somewhat rundown but picturesque.”⁶² So too would the show’s characters be adapted into the new context. Humberto and Andrea were a Mestizo couple, the former an *electro-mecánico*, and the latter a loving

⁶⁰ Edward Palmer to Joan Cooney, March 27, 1973, Box 180, Plaza Sésamo General File, 1970-1980, CTW Archives; Palmer, “Sesame Street,” 112.

⁶¹ The Children’s Television Workshop Presents Open Sesame, Box 168, CTW Archives.

⁶² Premise: “Plaza Sésamo,” Box 180, Plaza Sésamo General File, 1970-1980, CTW Archives, 1-2.

housewife and mother of their three children. Don Manuel was the curmudgeonly shopkeeper in the vein of Mr. Hooper whom the children knew was kind at heart behind a rough exterior. Filiponio and Loro Maloro were the show's versions of Big Bird and Oscar: Filiponio was a man-sized puppet of unclear animal variety, and Loro Maloro was designed as a parrot living in the plaza providing "caustic comments."⁶³

The co-production model was more than simply the creation of culturally relevant content. Perhaps even more importantly for the success of the program as an educational tool was the adaption of a learning model and curriculum. Rather than impose learning goals based on what had been successful in the United States – foremost focus representation of numbers and letters – educational advisors to *Plaza Sésamo* were given autonomy to develop their own curriculum through planning seminars similar to those held for *Sesame Street* in 1968.⁶⁴ From these seminars came a highly amended curriculum, with the biggest changes consisting of a revised approach to reading and sight recognition that de-emphasized phonetics and discrimination of individual letters, along with a greater focus on problem solving.⁶⁵ These revisions were evident in the curriculum for the show's second season. Where *Sesame Street*'s curriculum had begun with symbolic representation and cognitive processes, *Plaza Sésamo*'s began with "El niño y su mundo," – the child and his world – which had been relegated to lowest

⁶³ By the time *Plaza Sésamo* came to air, Filiponio had been replaced by Abelardo, Big Bird's cousin, with a similar design but different colorings to his American counterpart after originally being cast as a crocodile. Loro Maloro also underwent a name change and became Paco but remained as a parrot. "Meet Sesame Street's Global Cast of Characters," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 6, 2009; Premise: Plaza Sésamo, Box 180; "Television in Review: Sesame South of the Border," *Nashua Telegraph*, February 26, 1975.

⁶⁴ Palmer, "Sesame Street," 112-113.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

status in *Sesame Street*'s model.⁶⁶ *Plaza Sésamo*'s curriculum gave a detailed outline of educational goals which systematically addressed social relationships and the needs of children, as well as practices that were intended to produce good habits. The parts of the body and their functions were given high priority, along with personal care through prioritizing good hygiene: children would be shown the importance of properly brushing their teeth, eating good food and drinking clean water, and expressing emotions like love, surprise, and sadness.⁶⁷ Social relationships formed another pillar of *Plaza Sésamo*'s educational model, with a focus on presenting individuals' different perspectives and the importance of cooperation, the division of labor, and how to solve conflicts in daily life.⁶⁸ These focuses did not mean that symbolic and numeric representation were entirely cut out of the program; these lessons were still present, with many of the educational goals found in *Sesame Street* – the recognition of numbers and letters, basic geometric forms, listening skills, and basic comparatives – part of *Plaza Sésamo*'s curriculum.⁶⁹ However, international co-productions had leeway in emphasizing different educational skills and could present them in a different order. The similarities and differences in focus point to a broader dynamic of co-production, a wide breadth for interpretation of content and learning objectives to fit into other contexts, free of direct CTW oversight. Such a method was intended to produce an educationally sound program that would respond to local contexts more effectively than would have been possible otherwise. This outcome was the result of years of learning through the various forms of international production and again highlights the CTW's

⁶⁶ Exposición de los fines educativos que se persiguen en la segunda temporada experimental de "Plaza Sésamo," November 11, 1974, Box 180, Plaza Sésamo General File, 1970-1980. CTW Archives; Lesser, *Children and Television*, 62-65.

⁶⁷ Exposición de los fines educativos, Box 180, 1-2, CTW Archives.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-10.

priority on maximizing educational effectiveness and adapting into local cultures as opposed to producing an American product exported for foreign audiences.

While *Plaza Sésamo* had been designed from the outset to be a co-production, the other route taken was by “Open Sesame” programs which developed over time into an independent production with its own content. The CTW did not adopt co-production in all markets simultaneously. In some locations, the CTW attempted to use the “Open Sesame” model before transitioning to a greater reliance on local production. One such example is *Sesamstrasse*, which began as part of the “Open Sesame” program and later developed its own identity. Broadcasters from the *Norddeutscher Rundfunk*, a television station based in Hamburg approached the CTW in 1970 with a concept for *Sesam Strasse*, a German-produced version of the program that would retain educational goals but adapt some of the “American” content, all with the aim of promoting independent learning in children.⁷⁰ With the introduction of “Open Sesame,” the first step to implementing the proposal was taken.

In 1973, *Sesamstrasse* launched in Germany and as had been the case in Britain quickly devolved into controversy, through in the German case the conflict centered more on the show’s social values than its educational content. *Der Spiegel* wrote of parents exasperated by their children ravenously eating like Cookie Monster or flipping over trashcans looking for Oscar the Grouch. Alternatively, some parents embraced the show along with their children, such as one who complained “on behalf of my five years old son” when parliamentary hearings pre-empted the show.⁷¹ The conflict between parents and educators who favored the program and those who

⁷⁰ “Sesam Strasse: Ideas and Thoughts about a German Version of ‘Sesame Street,’” Box 187, Germany, Sesamstrasse Correspondence, 1970, CTW Archives.

⁷¹ “Children’s Turn Also Comes Sometime,” *Der Spiegel*, March 5, 1973, Box 187, Germany, Sesamstrasse Correspondence, 1971-1973, CTW Archives, 2-3.

despised it was a highly regional one in Germany, as Bavarian broadcasters – similar to the BBC – banned the program, while other regions enthusiastically added it to the daily schedules.⁷²

German critics questioned the American blending of entertainment and learning and the show's high production values as taking away from the pedagogical impact of the program, with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, a Frankfurt newspaper, remarking: "In Germany learning and laughing never belonged together. Work and play were always in conflict. Shall that be changed all of the sudden?"⁷³ The answer to this controversy was a German-produced version of the program.

While "Open Sesame" had sought neutrality, the anger of some sections of the German public and educational establishment demonstrated that neutrality was not be enough for the success of a program. To win the support of German audiences, the CTW allowed German broadcasters to include specifically German segments in their adaptation of the program. At the beginning this accounted for around 30% of the total programming on *Sesamstrasse* created in Hamburg.⁷⁴ Co-production sought to overcome the cultural misunderstandings created by the "Open Sesame" model.

This early form of co-production was not without challenges, especially regarding what the CTW saw as the educational integrity of the program and of its intellectual property. Michael Davis's *Street Gang* mentions a controversy between the CTW and German broadcasters over the use of the word *Scheiss*, which most closely translates into English as "shit." In Davis's telling, the CTW allowed this to air, ascribing this as a part of cultural adaptation as the word

⁷² Ibid., 7.

⁷³ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

was used as “street vernacular.”⁷⁵ While an entertaining anecdote, archival sources show that neither the word in question nor the CTW’s reaction is accurate in this telling of events. Pointing to the collaborative relationship between the CTW and the Hamburg-based production team led by Dr. Karl-Heinz Grossman, internal correspondence records an objection from the CTW over the use of *Schiess*, and a clarification and response by Hamburg. In reality, the word *Arsch* had been used as part of a colloquial expression that had been cleared by the program’s board of advisors and the controversy was nothing more than a misunderstanding.⁷⁶ Rather than a story of culture shock, this more accurate telling reveals the autonomy given to domestic producers to adapt local cultures into the programs, which would, by the mid-1970s in Germany lead to ever-greater independence of *Sesamstrasse* and other “Open Sesame” projects through the introduction of more natively produced content, with the CTW retaining only a distant role supervising the educational quality of the programs.⁷⁷ The development of this approach could only have occurred following the learning in the show’s earlier years in Britain, “Open Sesame,” and the introduction of the co-production model.

Having learned from the “Open Sesame” and co-production models, producers from around the world gathered at the Amsterdam Conference on International Adaptation in 1978 to create a unified strategy and platform for future adaptation. The core of the conference’s agenda

⁷⁵ Davis, a journalist, compiles his “Complete History” almost entirely through interviews and recollections in oral histories, creating a very readable and personal story, but one which is not perhaps without incidental errors due to the fallibility of human memory. Davis, *Street Gang*, 210-211.

⁷⁶ A.H. Dwyer to Norton Wright, April 13, 1973, Box 187, Germany, Sesamstrasse Correspondence, 1971-1973 CTW Archives; Karl-Heinz Grossman, April 17, 1973, Box 187, Germany, Sesamstrasse Correspondence, 1971-1973, CTW Archives.

⁷⁷ One example of adaptation in the German context was *Sesamstrasse*’s theme song. Rather than “Can you tell me how to get to Sesame Street?” The song’s refrain was “Der, die, das/wir, wie, was/wieso, weshalb, warum?/Wer nicht fragt bleibt dumm,” in English: “This, that, there/who, how, what/how come, wherefore, why?/The one not asking remains stupid.” “Children’s Turn,” *Der Spiegel*, 3, CTW Archives.

was the screening of different co-productions, some of which had grown out of “Open Sesame” and others were original co-productions. These included: *Iftah Ya Simsim*, an Arabic version of *Sesame Street*; *Sesamstrasse*, which by this time consisted of mainly German produced material; *I, Rue Sésame*, the French co-production which grew out of *Bonjour Sésame*; a Japanese adaptation in English; and finally, *Sesame Street* itself.⁷⁸ From these discussions it was clear how much the productions had diverged, while still retaining shared core principles and aims.⁷⁹ Adaptation led to unique characteristics for each production, but the focus on education and on empirical research as the basis of designing an effective pedagogical tool and entertaining program remained central. The many forms of *Sesame Street* reflected the format and structure of their source material, even as they underwent great changes in implementation and emphasis. Reflecting on the conference, participants concluded that there was a need for continued focus on research and collaboration in the sharing of findings and results that were intended to promote the quality of programs across the world.⁸⁰

Co-production thus became truly international, a collaborative process that transferred ideas not only between the CTW and foreign producers, but among the coproducers themselves. The development of the co-production model was done through iterative learning that allowed the CTW and foreign producers to create a variety of programs that were explicitly designed to adapt to local contexts. The internationalization of collaboration points to a truly transnational

⁷⁸ International Conference Agenda, Box 168, International Conference on Adaptations of Sesame Street, May 1978, CTW Archives.

⁷⁹ Margot Berghaus to Gerald Lesser, January 14, 1979, Box 168, International Conference on Adaptations of Sesame Street, May 1978, CTW Archives.

⁸⁰ International Conference on Adaptation of “Sesame Street,” Box 168, International Conference on Adaptation of Sesame Street, CTW Archives.

diffusion of culture, both from the CTW and its source material to foreign producers, and between those producers themselves regarding structure and content. *Sesame Street*'s international adaptation is a concrete example of how cultural diffusion occurs, not through an imperialistic imposition of a dominant culture on others, but through processes of learning and adaptation that synthesize different cultures into a new product. By the time of the Amsterdam Conference, there was not one *Sesame Street*, but many: *plazas*, *rues*, *Strassen*, and *vilas* all directed towards one central aim, creating an entertaining and educational program for young children.

The collaborative, symbiotic relationship between the CTW and international coproducers set out in Amsterdam continued to grow in the years that followed. By 2000, *Sesame Street* was aired in 120 countries and had 130 million viewers. The original program had launched nineteen co-productions; in addition to *Sesamstrasse*, *Plaza Sésamo*, *Sesamstraat*, and *I, Rue Sésame*, co-production had expanded to new projects like Sweden's *Svenska Sesam*, Russia's *Ulitsa Sesam*, China's *Zhima Jie*, and Poland's *Ulica Sezamkowa*, among others.⁸¹ Not all of the versions remained on air for more than a few seasons, but the continued growth points to enduring success for the co-production model created in the 1970s, and of the research focused educational model first devised by the CTW in 1968. Development of *Sesame Street*'s international programming was a process of continual growth which considered local tastes while retaining its focus on fusing education and entertainment in the aim of using television to reduce educational gaps among young children both in the United States and around the world.

⁸¹ Cole, "The World of *Sesame Street* Research," *G is for Growing*, 148-154.

Historian Richard Pells, summarizing the relationship between American and European culture post-1945, has argued that the ever more interconnected nature of these regions must, for harmony's sake, coincide with acknowledgement of the benefits of "a pluralistic mixture of artistic and intellectual influences."⁸² In modern globalized society, such a statement goes beyond an Atlantic context and presents a truth of the world, and the value to be had through collaboration. *Sesame Street* is a clear example of the potential success inherent to such a venture. The CTW could have continually sought an approach like that seen in Britain: an importation of American content without adaptation to local cultures.⁸³ This likely would have led to many conflicts like that between Monica Sims and the BBC on the one hand, and sections of the British public aligned with the CTW on the other. In such an arrangement, the spread of the program, and of its educational model, would have been extremely limited. By first pursuing neutrality, the CTW saw the adaptability of their educational model, as well as the limitations to that approach. Only through recognizing the strengths of adaptation was *Sesame Street* able to conquer the world. But this conquering should not be seen as a victory of American over native cultures; rather, the co-production model allows for an approach that speaks to the needs of local viewers and creates independent productions which retain standard educational goals, but which present themselves in different forms and with different emphasis. Beyond the unique characters of the individual programs, *Sesame Street* in all its forms promoted understandings between individuals and cultures, an achievement in television worth celebrating.

⁸² Pells, "American Culture Abroad," 83.

⁸³ Some companies like Disney have taken this approach. An example of this may be seen in the case of Eastern Europe, where Disney capitalized on the newly de-regulated and independent television market in the 1990s to introduce their programs. Broadcasting dubbed versions of American shows, Disney, followed by Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, flooded and dominated children's broadcasting in the region by the early 2000s. Lustyik, "From a Socialist Endeavor to a Commercial Enterprise," 111-118.

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