**Video Script**

**Lecture 26 – Public Television**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

[Sings *Sesame Street theme*] Can you tell me how to get to *Sesame Street*? After today’s lecture, you will *literally* be able to answer that question. We’re going to be talking about public television, the Children’s Television Workshop, and *Sesame Street*, one of the most beloved educational shows of all time.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture.

**Newton Minow**

Let’s jump in here, with our ol’ pal Newton Minow. I swear, every picture I find of Newt is greater than the last. How is this not a meme?

Anyway, today we’re going to think about public broadcasting—specifically, about educational television for children. This, like seemingly everything else, is revolutionized in the 1960s. So, remember back to Newt’s “vast wasteland” speech at the beginning of the decade. **[ANIMATION]** One of the things he’s talking about in that speech is the need for more educational television to serve the public interest.

**PBS & Text**

Recall also that, through the 1960s, **[ANIMATION]** the FCC is regularly licensing entertainment corporations to manage and provide programming on the majority of the public airwaves. **[ANIMATION]** It also sets aside a little chunk of the airwaves for educational shows, but there are no funds attached to it. **[ANIMATION]** Why should anyone produce educational programming? What’s the incentive? **[ANIMATION]** The commercial imperative to create big audiences that in turn earn big ad rates means that networks are not inclined to produce educational television, which would certainly bring in a smaller audience than mindless sit-coms, cartoons, westerns, and other television that people use to unwind.

**PBS Logo**

The educational programming that *does* exist in the 1960s, mostly on those little UHF channels, is mostly due to the philanthropy of private donors like the Ford Foundation. So, how do we get from this spotty and privatized model for educational TV to PBS and the children’s broadcasting that many Americans grew up watching?

**LBJ**

The answer begins here, in Austin, with our homegrown President Lyndon B. Johnson. Before he entered politics, Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson were in the broadcasting business.

**KTBC**

They owned and operated the Texas Broadcasting Company, which had a radio station and also a TV station, KTBC, which began broadcasting in 1952 just after the FCC license freeze came to an end.

**KTBC #2**

They bought the station with Lady Bird’s money—it was really *her* project, and her investment, and she was pretty involved. She remained instrumental in the operation of the radio station in particular until she died, in 2007. Here, you see Lady Bird Johnson and the station manager of KTBC sometime roundabout the 1960s, posing with a very stylish news vehicle.

**KTBC**

KTBC brought the nation footage of one of Austin’s most tragic events—the 1966 shooting at the UT tower. They were on the scene delivering these awful, shattering images of the violence and its aftermath.

**LBJ**

All of this is to say that because of his involvement with the station, LBJ had some understanding of broadcasting when he took over the presidency after JFK’s assassination and the years that followed.

**[ANIMATION]** He rolled out the Great Society initiatives beginning in 1964. **[ANIMATION]** These were a set of domestic programs whose goal was the elimination of poverty and racial injustice and even environmental injustice. **[ANIMATION]** For example, the Great Society initiatives established:

* Job Corps (wherein 100k men would either get paid work on conservation projects or skilled job training)
* A national work study program for people who couldn’t afford college
* Funds for farmers to purchase land and establish agricultural co-operatives
* Medicare and Medicaid
* The Head Start program for early education
* National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities
* Early environmental acts like the Water Quality Act
* …and the Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act, which limited car emissions.

**LBJ 2**

Why am I rattling off all of this legislation? Because in 1967, as part of these Great Society initiatives, we get the Public Broadcasting Act. The structure of the act is a little confusing, but basically, the legislation sets up the nonprofit Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which in turn raises money for and distributes funds to support educational television. It helps pave the way for and fund PBS and NPR, which are the country’s public television and radio options. It also funds local stations, who finally have the money to create and distribute educational and public interest programs.

**Newspaper and quotes**

I’m not so much concerned that you understand how the legislation works, just that it paved the way for public television and radio, where the commercial imperative for high ratings and ad dollars was not so pressing. Finally, educational television had a home.

**[ANIMATION]** As President Johnson described it, the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 “announces to the world that our nation wants more than just material wealth; our nation wants more than a chicken in every pot. We in America have an appetite for excellence, too. While we work every day to produce new goods and new wealth, we want most of all to enrich man’s spirit. That is the purpose of this act. It will give a wider, and I think, stronger voice to educational radio and television by providing new funds for broadcast facilities.”

**[ANIMATION]** However, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting—the entity set up by the legislation to raise and direct funds—is not free from politics or political squabbling. Its board is appointed by the president, and they’re subject to appropriations funding. So, as political winds change, so does the funding and character of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. This article, from 1967—so, before the bill was even passed—worries about exactly that kind of political interference.

**Quote**

And here is an excerpt from a 2005 NPR story about politics in the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The CBP has a charge in its charter to be objective and balanced, but during the Bush administration (which was a conservative administration), the government set out to correct what they saw as a leftist bent to PBS and NPR programming. This correction took the form of more right-wing, or conservative, programming, as well as torpedoing a bill that would make it more difficult to politically stack the CPB board.

**Joan Ganz Cooney**

So, all of this legislation sets the stage for this woman, Joan Ganz Cooney, **[ANIMATION]** and some of her closest friends.

**Ganz Cooney (with text)**

Cooney began her career in television in the early 1960s. **[ANIMATION]** She started off as a publicist for NBC, **[ANIMATION]** but moved on to produce television documentaries about social issues like poverty and inequality. Through this work, she becomes interested in the issue of how poverty affects children’s development.

**[ANIMATION]** So, in 1966 she works on this study about how television might be an effective tool for pre-K education; it specifically focuses on the effectiveness of television as a potential substitute for preschool education for children in low-income or under-resourced communities where there’s either no access to preschool or their parents can’t afford it.

**CTW**

In 1968, Cooney founds the Children’s Television Workshop, a non-profit organization which argues that TV for kids should be made by people with expertise in child development. The CTW was formed in order to produce a show that proves all of her theories: that carefully designed programs for kids *can* make a difference in their education, especially for low-income kids in urban areas. Cooney and her team spend a year researching, raising money for, and developing this project.

**Sesame Street**

…and, as you might have surmised by now, the show that they produce is *Sesame Street*, which debuts on November 10, 1969. After all of that research and development, what makes it *different* than other children’s programming?

**[ANIMATION]** First of all, they do succeed in creating a show with the input of educators and child psychologists—but not *just* experts. They pair these people with television writers, creating a team that can deliver educational material in an age-appropriate, effective, and *entertaining* way.

**[ANIMATION]** The goals of the show are to create a something that is “tailored to television,” not to put the classroom on TV. It’s like the difference between taking an online class that just gives you an old recording of a professor in a lecture hall vs. an online course that was designed for the internet and takes advantage of everything the internet has to offer.

**[ANIMATION]** The show was modeled on *Laugh-In*, which was a popular music and variety show of the 1960s. That means that it’ll be hip, cool, bright, quick, and eclectic, using both songs and sketches.

**[ANIMATION]** It centers the needs of low-income city kids, but they find that their show’s formula is widely appealing to kids from other socioeconomic conditions too.

**[ANIMATION]** They specifically wanted the show to be “hip and fast and funny,” with stuff in it for parents as well, like celebrity cameos. Not every kid in the 1970s is gonna know who Paul Simon or Celia Cruz is, but the parents who do will appreciate it. These little nods to parents encourage them to watch the show with their kids, as opposed to tuning out a mindless program that assumes they’re not in the room.

**[ANIMATION]** One of their biggest innovations is, instead of creating whole shows, they create modular blocks of content that can be tested, repeated if kids like it, and replaced if they don’t.

**Number 12 Gif**

One of those repetitive pieces of modular content that I grew up with and still think of on a daily basis is this, an animation about counting to the number 12. **[Sings 12 song.]** It was repeated throughout my whole childhood, I *loved* watching this pinball cartoon, and it stuck with me.

**Sesame Street (again)**

**[ANIMATION]** Perhaps the most unique thing about *Sesame Street* is that it uses the structure of commercial television that kids know so well, but repurposes it toward educational ends. What you’ll see in an episode of *Sesame Street* is several minutes of a narrative, usually starring the Muppets and the human cast members, followed by a few 30 to 60 short films or animated segments, after which the narrative resumes.

This is the *exact same* structure as commercial television, but *Sesame Street* brilliantly uses those “ad breaks” to sell concepts like letters, counting to 12, friendship, and other social skills to kids…instead of cereal, or, lord help us, Winston cigarettes.

**Long Quote**

This long quote, which I’m not going to read in its entirety, is from a great article about the history of *Sesame Street* by a scholar named Mavis Reimer. In it, she talks about how the *Sesame Street* team purposefully adopted Madison Avenue techniques of selling when the produced their first faux commercial for the letter J. When they tested this piece of modular content with kids, their little baby viewers went bananas for it—they loved it! They also found that kids had been so trained by commercial television that the breaks were where you saw cool things like cereal and toys and products you might want your mom to buy you, they tuned in more attentively to content which mimicked ads.

Further, they also found that kids were able to “endure enormous amounts of repetition,” meaning they liked content that was itself repetitive and they liked watching it over and over. This is something you see in children’s television across decades, up until today. I remember I despised the year one of my little brothers was into *Blue’s Clues* because Nickelodeon repeated the exact same episode each day for a week, because that’s how pre-K kids prefer to watch television.

**Flintstones/Elmo**

As the article later says, “rather than fight the most debased of all television genres, *Sesame Street* would turn the form into its most valuable pedagogical tool, replacing **[ANIMATION]** the BUY BUY BUY mantra of commercial television with its own mantra, **[ANIMATION]** LEARN LEARN LEARN.”

So, as you can see here they replace traditional commercials with faux commercial sponsorships, like this *Sesame Street* potty-training special being brought to you by the letter P and the number 2, which is a very good poop joke.

**Snuffy revealed**

Your clip for today demonstrates how *Sesame Street* designed its content around the psychological well-being of children in addition to just their education. This is nowhere more evident than in their choice to finally reveal Snuffy, a.k.a Mr. Snuffalupagus, to the cast in 1985.

Snuffy was a bit on the show for fourteen years preceding the reveal, and by that I mean that despite being the largest puppet on the show—he’s gigantic—no one ever saw him but Big Bird. The show played a lot with this question of whether he was Big Bird’s imaginary friend, or whether he was just shy and had bad timing. Throughout the 1980s, however, news stories about child sexual abuse reached the national consciousness and thinking around the topic changed. As an employee of the CTW put it, “the fear was that if *Sesame Street* represented adults not believing what kids said, they might not be motivated to tell the truth” if someone was abusing them.

Child psychologists who worked for the Children’s Television Workshop thought Snuffy might be a great way to show kids that adults will believe you when you need them to. So, over, the course of about a year, they wrote in segments where the human cast takes Big Bird at his word that Snuffy is real, even though they’ve never seen him with their own eyes. And eventually, Snuffy makes his grand debut.

**Sesame Street Set**

And while I don’t want to ruin a beloved show, people have over the years have made some valid critiques. Did *Sesame Street* actually depict the lives of the urban, poor kids it was supposed to reach? Or did it transform their lives into an unrealistic picture of happy multiculturalism? Did it “turn a blind eye to the actual conditions of their existence?” Or was it “an experiment in generating new images of the social world?” as Mavis Reimer put it in her article.

**Lily**

By way of example, *Sesame Street* didn’t introduce its first homeless character until 2018—nearly fifty years after the show began telling stories about urban children’s lives.

**HBO**

It’s particularly worth noting—and this is where we’ll leave things for today—that Lily, the Muppet experiencing homelessness, didn’t make her debut until after the show had moved from public television to premium cable channel HBO, which it did in 2015. In 2019, it moved again, to HBOMax. The HBOMax deal also included rights to the show’s 50-season archive.

New episodes of *Sesame Street* require a subscription. Only after several months are those episodes rebroadcast on PBS for families who don’t have access to HBOMax. What does it mean for *Sesame Street*, a show that was intended to level the playing field for low-income kinds who didn’t have educational resources in their community, to now be kept behind a paywall? Can every kid still “get to Sesame street” when families with premium cable are prioritized for access to new episodes?

While we don’t know for sure, it’s a useful case to think through the advantages and limitations of our current public broadcasting model in an age of streaming, digital entertainment.