

## = Influence of Sesame Street =

The children 's television program Sesame Street premiered in 1969 to high ratings , positive reviews , and some controversy , which have continued during its history . Even though the show aired on only 67 % of American televisions at the time of its premiere , it earned a 3 @. @ 3 Nielsen rating , or 1 @. @ 9 million households . By its tenth anniversary in 1979 , 9 million American children under the age of six were watching Sesame Street daily . Its ratings declined in the 1990s , due to societal changes . A survey conducted in 1993 found that by the age of three , 95 % of all American children had watched it . By its fortieth anniversary in 2009 , it was ranked the fifteenth most popular children 's show .

According to writer Michael Davis , Sesame Street is " perhaps the most vigorously researched , vetted , and fretted @- @ over program " . By 2001 , there were over 1 @, @ 000 research studies regarding its efficacy , impact , and effect on American culture . Two landmark summative evaluations , conducted by the Educational Testing Service ( ETS ) in 1970 and 1971 , demonstrated that Sesame Street had a significant educational impact on its viewers . Additional studies conducted throughout the show 's history demonstrated that the show continued to have a positive effect on its young viewers .

Sesame Street has also been the subjects of many controversies throughout its long run on television . In May 1970 , a commission in Mississippi voted to ban the show . The controversy surrounding the show stemmed from cultural and historical reasons regarding children and television 's effect on them . Latino and feminists groups criticized Sesame Street for its depictions of some groups , but its producers have worked to address their concerns throughout the years . By 2009 , Sesame Street had received 118 Emmy Awards , more than any other television series .

## = = Ratings = =

When Sesame Street premiered in 1969 , it aired on only 67 @. @ 6 % of American televisions , but it earned a 3 @. @ 3 Nielsen rating , or 1 @. @ 9 million households . The Children 's Television Workshop ( CTW ) , the organization that oversaw the production of Sesame Street , insisted that its seemingly low ratings were misleading . They found that although a small percentage of all viewers watched Sesame Street , approximately a quarter of all preschoolers watched it regularly . Ninety percent of households who viewed the show had children under the age of six .

In the winter of 1970 , partly as a response to criticism that they were not reaching their intended audience , the CTW conducted a poll of four urban neighborhoods in New York , Chicago , and Washington , D.C. The results of the poll were positive in three out of the four neighborhoods and confirmed the show 's high viewership . Sesame Street 's high ratings increased during its second season , and Nielsen reported high audience loyalty . Gerald S. Lesser , CTW 's first advisory board chair , reported rumors about the show becoming a fad among college students . Its ratings steadily increased for the first five seasons , and Nielsen reported that Sesame Street had the highest ratings of any PBS program . In 1985 , the Workshop estimated that 20 % of its regular viewers consisted of adults .

By the show 's tenth anniversary in 1979 , 9 million American children under the age of six were watching Sesame Street daily . Four out of five children had watched it over a six @- @ week period , and 90 % of children from low @- @ income inner @- @ city homes regularly viewed the show . According to a 1993 survey conducted by the US Department of Education , out of the show 's 6 @. @ 6 million viewers , 2 @. @ 4 million kindergartners regularly watched it . 77 % of preschoolers watched it once a week , and 86 % of kindergartners , first- , and second @- @ grade students had watched it once a week before starting school . The show reached most young children in almost all demographic groups , most significantly economically disadvantaged children ; 88 % of children from low @- @ income families and 90 % of both African @- @ American and Latino children watched the show before entering kindergarten . Over 80 % of children from all minority language groups watched it before starting school . Children from the poorest communities were most likely to be regular viewers , as were younger children . Children whose parents did not read to them

regularly were less likely to be regular viewers , and children of highly educated parents stopped viewing earlier than children from disadvantaged households .

The show 's ratings significantly decreased in the early 1990s , when children ' viewing habits and the television marketplace had changed . In 1969 , the choices in children 's programming were limited , but the growth of the home @-@ video industry during the 1980s and the boom in children 's programming during the 90s on cable channels like Nickelodeon , which were directly influenced by Sesame Street , resulted in lower ratings for Sesame Street . In 2002 , The New York Times reported that " learning to click the remote control has become a developmental milestone , like crawling and walking " . The producers responded to these societal changes by making large @-@ scale structural changes to the show .

By 2006 , Sesame Street had become " the most widely viewed children 's television show in the world " , with 20 international independent versions and broadcasts in over 120 countries . A 1996 survey found that 95 % of all American preschoolers had watched the show by the time they were three years old . In 2006 , it was estimated that 75 million Americans had watched the series as children . By the show 's 40th anniversary in 2009 , it was ranked the fifteenth most popular children 's show on television .

= = Effect = =

According to Davis , Sesame Street is " perhaps the most vigorously researched , vetted , and fretted @-@ over program " . By 2001 , there were over 1 @,@ 000 research studies regarding its efficacy , impact , and effect on American culture . The CTW solicited the Educational Testing Service ( ETS ) to conduct its summative research . ETS ' two " landmark " summative evaluations , conducted in 1970 and 1971 , demonstrated that Sesame Street had a significant educational impact on its viewers . These studies provided the majority of the early educational effects of Sesame Street and have been cited in other studies of the effects of television on young children . Additional studies conducted throughout Sesame Street 's history demonstrated that the show continued to have a positive effect on its young viewers .

Lesser believed that Sesame Street research " may have conferred a new respectability upon the studies of the effects of visual media upon children " . He also believed that the show had the same effect on the prestige in the television industry of producing shows for children . Historian Robert Morrow , in his book Sesame Street and the Reform of Children 's Television , which chronicled the show 's influence on children 's television and on the television industry as a whole , reported that many critics of commercial television saw Sesame Street as a " straightforward illustration for reform " . Les Brown , a writer for Variety , saw in Sesame Street " a hope for a more substantial future " for television .

The networks responded by creating more high @-@ quality television programs , but that many saw them as " appeasement gestures " . In spite of the CTW 's effectiveness in creating a popular show , commercial television " made only a limited effort to emulate CTW 's methods " , and did not use a curriculum or evaluate what children learned from them . Morrow reported that by the mid @-@ 1970s , commercial television abandoned their experiments with creating better children 's programming . Other critics hoped that Sesame Street , with its depiction of a functioning , multicultural community , would nurture racial tolerance in its young viewers .

As critic Richard Roeper has stated , perhaps one of the strongest indicators of the influence of Sesame Street have been the enduring rumors and urban legends surrounding the show and its characters , especially about Bert and Ernie .

= = Critical reception = =

Sesame Street was praised from its debut in 1969 . Newsday reported that several newspapers and magazines had written " glowing " reports about CTW and co @-@ creator Joan Ganz Cooney . Although the series had been on the air for less than a year , Time Magazine featured Big Bird , who had received more fan mail than any of the show 's human hosts , on its cover and declared , " ... It

is not only the best children 's show in TV history , it is one of the best parents ' shows as well " . The press overwhelmingly praised the new show ; several popular magazines and niche magazines lauded it . A 2010 survey found that most parents supported their children 's viewing of Sesame Street and other PBS educational shows , and many educators used them as aides in the classroom .

" Sesame Street is ... with lapses , the most intelligent and important program in television . That is not anything much yet " .

-Renata Adler , The New Yorker , 1972

David Frost declared Sesame Street " a hit everywhere it goes " . An executive at ABC , while recognizing that Sesame Street was not perfect , stated that the show " opened children 's TV to taste and wit and substance " ... and " made the climate right for improvement " . By the end of the show 's first season , ratings were high , the song " Rubber Duckie " was on the music charts for nine weeks , and Big Bird appeared on The Flip Wilson Show . Also in 1970 , Sesame Street won twenty awards , including a Peabody Award , three Emmys , an award from the Public Relations Society of America , a Clio , and the Prix Jeunesse award . President Richard Nixon sent Cooney a congratulatory letter . Dr. Benjamin Spock predicted that the program would result in " better trained citizens , fewer unemployables in the next generation , fewer people on welfare , and smaller jail populations " . By 1995 , the show had won two Peabody Awards and four Parents ' Choice Awards . In addition , it was the subject of retrospectives at the Smithsonian Institution and the Museum of Modern Art . In 2011 , puppeteer Kevin Clash was the subject of the documentary Being Elmo : A Puppeteer 's Journey . The documentary , directed by Constance Marks , received several awards , including the 2011 Black Film Critics Circle Award and the Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival , where it premiered . By 2009 , the series had received 118 Emmy Awards , more than any other television series .

Sesame Street was not without its detractors , however . In May 1970 , a state commission in Mississippi voted to ban Sesame Street . A member of the commission leaked the vote to the New York Times , stating that " Mississippi was not yet ready " for the show 's integrated cast . Cooney called the ban " a tragedy for both the white and black children of Mississippi " . The Mississippi commission later reversed its decision , after the vote had made national news .

According to Children and Television , Lesser 's account of the development and early years of Sesame Street , there was little criticism of the show in the months following its premiere , but it increased at the end of its first season and beginning of the second season . Lesser put the early criticism into four categories : educational goals , how the goals were chosen and obtained , the show 's possible unintended effects , and its portrayal of minorities and women . Historian Robert W. Morrow suggested that much of the early criticism , which he called " surprisingly intense " , stemmed from cultural and historical reasons in regards to , as he put it , " the place of children in American society and the controversies about television 's effects on them " .

The " most important " studies that found negative effects of Sesame Street were conducted by educator Herbert A. Sprigle and psychologist Thomas D. Cook during its first two seasons . Both studies found that the show increased the educational gap between poor and middle @-@ class children . Morrow reported that these studies had little impact on the public discussion about Sesame Street . Social scientist and Head Start founder Urie Bronfenbrenner criticized the show for being too wholesome , stating , " The old , the ugly or the unwanted is simply made to disappear through a manhole " . He also criticized the show for presenting bland and unrealistic characters , and for failing to teach children about social relationships and how to become a part of the society around them . Psychologist Leon Eisenberg saw Sesame Street 's urban setting as " superficial " and having little to do with the problems confronted by the inner @-@ city child .

Head Start director Edward Zigler was probably Sesame Street 's most vocal critic in the show 's early years . He withdrew Head Start 's funding of the show , becoming the first of CTW 's original investors to do so . Morrow stated that the basis of Zigler 's criticism was concern that the federal government would transfer their funding of Head Start to CTW . Also according to Morrow , these studies were utilized by critics in Sesame Street 's later years , especially by child development psychologists Jerome and Dorothy G. Singer , who insisted the television shortened children 's

attention spans , and by author Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* , who believed that television could not teach children . Postman claimed that *Sesame Street* also introduced children to a shallow pop culture , undermined American education , and relieved parents of their responsibility of teaching their children how to read .

Since federal funds had been used to produce the show , more segments of the population insisted upon being represented on *Sesame Street* . Morrow credited CTW 's commitment to multiculturalism as one source for their conflicts with the leadership of minority groups , especially Latino groups and feminists . These conflicts were resolved when the CTW added or substituted offending segments and characters . By 1977 , the cast consisted of two African American women , one of whom was single , two African American men , a Chicano man , two white men , an American Indian woman , a Puerto Rican woman , and a Deaf white woman .

Latino groups criticized the show for the lack of Hispanic characters during its early years . A committee of Hispanic activists , commissioned by the CTW in 1970 , called *Sesame Street* " racist " and said that the show 's bilingual aspects were of " poor quality and patronizing " . According to Morrow , Cooney admitted that the show 's bilingual elements were " not well thought out " . By 1971 , the CTW hired Hispanic actors , production staff , and researchers , and by the mid @-@ 70s , Morrow reported that " the show included Chicano and Puerto Rican cast members , films about Mexican holidays and foods , and cartoons that taught Spanish words " . In 1989 , *Sesame Street* created a four @-@ year " race relations curriculum " that focused on introducing its viewers to various cultural backgrounds .

The *New York Times* reported that creating strong female characters " that make kids laugh , but not ... as female stereotypes " has been a challenge for the producers of *Sesame Street* . Davis reported that the National Organization for Women ( NOW ) expressed concerns that the show needed to be " less male @-@ oriented " . Members of NOW were " rankled by the portrayal of Susan , whom they saw as a subservient , powerless dispenser of milk and cookies " . In the spring of 1970 , Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman objected to what she considered *Sesame Street* 's portrayal of women and girls as passive . In late 1970 , the NOW threatened to boycott the show . The show 's producers satisfied these critics by making Susan a nurse and by hiring a female writer .

According to Morrow , change regarding how women and girls were depicted on *Sesame Street* occurred slowly . CTW 's research staff , which were mostly made up of women , worked with the mostly male production staff to raise their consciousnesses about how women and girls were portrayed in their scripts . Another source of friction between the CTW and feminists were the lack of female Muppets , for which they held Jim Henson responsible , as well as his organization of all @-@ male puppeteers , who tended to create male characters . The demanding production schedule tended to attract only men , and Henson expressed his opinion that women were incapable of withstanding it . Gikow believed that the difficulty creating breakout Muppet characters was due to children 's viewing styles : girls have tended to become attached to male characters they like , but boys did not tend to form the same attachments to female characters . The show 's inventory of material , some of which many feminists found sexist and which were shown over and over , were slowly replaced by new , less sexist segments . As more female Muppets performers like Fran Brill , Stephanie D 'Abruzzo , and Leslie Carrara @-@ Rudolph were hired and trained , stronger female characters like Abby Cadabby were created . As an interesting contrast , *Sesame Street* was also chastised by a Louisiana critic for the presence of strong single women on the show .

In 1995 , journalist Kay Hymowitz called *Sesame Street* " a triumph of appearance over substance " and credited its success not with quality , but with " a combination of savvy timing , sophisticated image making , and vigorous promotion " . She held the show partly responsible for the declining verbal abilities of American students , and accused the show of affirming negative stereotypes about women . According to Hymowitz , the show 's creators discouraged children 's natural curiosity about the world . She criticized the show for , instead of transforming television , being " devoured " by it . She took issue with its use of cultural references , stating that the show taught young children to embrace the negative values of commercialism , celebrity , and anti @-@ intellectualism . She

insisted that by using television 's production values , the producers of Sesame Street emphasized their " jazzy medium " more than the educational content they were supposed to convey . Hymowitz took issue with the show 's educational claims , stating that Sesame Street diminished young children 's readiness for reading by limiting their abilities to engage in analytical and creative thinking . She reported that most of the positive research conducted on the show has been done by the CTW , and then sent to a sympathetic press . She charged that the studies conducted by the CTW " hint at advocacy masquerading as social science " .

In 2003 , one of Sesame Street 's international co @-@ productions , Takalani Sesame , caused some controversy in the US when the first HIV @-@ positive Muppet , Kami , was created in response to South Africa 's AIDS epidemic . It marked the first time AIDS and the goal of confronting the disease 's stigma was included in a preschool curriculum . According to the documentary , The World According to Sesame Street , the reaction of many in the US surprised Sesame Workshop . Some members of Congress attacked Sesame Street , Sesame Workshop , and PBS . According to co @-@ producer Naila Farouky , " The reaction we got in the US blew me away . I didn 't expect people to be so horrible ... and hateful and mean " . The controversy in the US was short @-@ lived , and died down when the public discovered the facts about the South African co @-@ production , and when United Nations Secretary @-@ General Kofi Annan and prominent minister and conservative political commentator Jerry Falwell praised the Workshop 's efforts . Kami went on to be named UNICEF 's Champion for Children in November 2003 .