

## Case 34

### Children's Television Workshop and *SESAME STREET*

*Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1966*

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*Background.* In the mid-1960s, children's television programming was hard to find, with *Captain Kangaroo* as the only weekday show directed at the preschool audience. The Ford Foundation, the primary financial supporter of National Educational Television, was interested solely in adult "liberal education."<sup>527</sup> A couple of studies in the 1960s, however, would spark new ideas in the potential for television to educate mass audiences of children. One reported that it could cost as much as \$2.75 billion to educate, in a traditional classroom setting, the country's twelve million three- to five-year-old children who, at the time, received no formal education.<sup>528</sup> Another, a Nielsen survey, noted that children under six watched an average of thirty hours of television a week.<sup>529</sup>

*Strategy.* The idea that led to the creation of Children's Television Workshop arose at a conversation in 1966 at the home of Joan Ganz Cooney. Cooney hosted a dinner party at her Gramercy Park apartment to celebrate her first Emmy for a documentary entitled *Poverty, Anti-Poverty and the Poor*, to which she invited Carnegie Corporation of New York Vice President Lloyd Morrisett.<sup>530</sup>

Morrisett, who had long worked on the Corporation's efforts in childhood development and was mindful of both the costs of preschool education and the prevalence of television among children, asked Cooney whether television could be used effectively to educate young children.<sup>531</sup> Cooney, intrigued, thought through the prospects of children's educational television with Morrisett. Shortly after the party, the Carnegie Corporation agreed to fund a feasibility study that Cooney would conduct. She began the study in June 1966, interviewing twenty-six cognitive psychologists, educators, and pediatricians.<sup>532</sup>

Cooney presented the results of her study to the Carnegie Corporation in October. In it, she suggested that a full scale evaluation be conducted in light of the widespread viewing habits of young children.<sup>533</sup> The Corporation wanted to pursue the evaluation Cooney suggested, but the cost of the evaluation was higher than the Corporation could commit. Morrisett, forecasting the cost to be about \$4–5 million, began to seek foundation partners to join with Carnegie in funding the proposal.<sup>534</sup>

For months, Morrisett's fundraising attempts with other foundations and other organizations came up dry. On June 30 of the following year, however, at a meeting in Washington with U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe II, a friend of Morrisett's, Howe expressed great interest in the project and suggested that the U.S. Office of Education might provide substantial financial support for such an effort.<sup>535</sup> The Carnegie Corporation board, demonstrating its faith in the project in hopes of attracting other donors, approved a \$1 million commitment in January 1968, which the Ford Foundation followed with a commitment of \$250,000 three weeks later, along with a promise of additional funds if the program was successful in its early stages. Ford later contributed an additional \$1 million. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting provided another \$1 million in one of its earliest major grants. The U.S. Office of Education, true to Howe's pledge, contributed \$4 million.<sup>536</sup>

The Children's Television Workshop (CTW), the name devised for the entity that would conduct the evaluation Cooney suggested, and *Sesame Street*, CTW's first program, were announced to the public in March 1968. Cooney was named CTW's executive director.<sup>537</sup> CTW was initially affiliated with National Educational Television for the legal and administrative services that organization could provide, but it became independent a year later.<sup>538</sup>

David D. Connell, former executive producer of *Captain Kangaroo*, became the executive producer

of *Sesame Street*, giving the project substantial credibility. Connell was initially deterred from taking the post by the large team of academicians affiliated with the project and the fear that their presence would detract from the entertainment value of any resulting programs. When Cooney assured Connell that the program would not sacrifice entertainment for educational value, Connell agreed to join CTW.<sup>529</sup>

Part of *Sesame Street*'s innovation was the comprehensive research effort that ensured the program would be both educational and would also sustain the attention of its young viewers. This research effort was coordinated in large part by the Educational Testing Service. Former CTW President David Britt noted at the twentieth anniversary of *Sesame Street*'s debut that "research has been at the core of *Sesame Street*." Discussing the importance of research in ongoing CTW series development, Britt said that "research is there during preliminary development of shows, and continues during production, helping us create programs that children both like and understand."<sup>530</sup>

*Impact.* *Sesame Street* premiered on public television on November 10, 1969. Even considering the massive marketing campaign CTW undertook to promote a large audience for *Sesame Street*'s first few episodes, particularly among minority and underprivileged children, its ratings far surpassed the expectations of its creators.<sup>541</sup> Almost 1.5 million television homes tuned in to *Sesame Street* during its first week.<sup>542</sup> Research efforts monitoring the learning progress of *Sesame Street* viewers demonstrated significant advances; quite simply, those children who watched the program demonstrated clear educational progress.<sup>543</sup>

CTW later drew some criticism for its "failure" to close the education gap between disadvantaged children and middle-class children. Early in the project, compensatory education was one of its objectives. Since many underprivileged children had access to television, the project, its early promoters thought, could help to close the education gap at an early age. The problem with such an objective was that its premise required that privileged children would not watch *Sesame Street*. Disadvantaged children who watched the program did surpass the children who did not watch, but in fact, almost all children, and their parents, were drawn to the program, neutralizing the potential for any compensatory effect.<sup>544</sup> A Russell Sage Foundation analysis of the initial ETS study even found that, since white children watched *Sesame Street* more than black children, the program exacerbated the education gap. CTW responded that it had dropped compensatory education as an objective for *Sesame Street*, focusing instead on maximizing the educational potential of television programming, an objective on which it exceeded all expectation.<sup>545</sup>

Despite any criticism levied against it, *Sesame Street* is widely understood to be one of the most successful television ventures ever. Today, *Sesame Street* is seen in more than 120 countries.<sup>546</sup> As of 2005, *Sesame Street*'s Emmy wins total 101, the most for any television series.<sup>547</sup>

## Notes

527. James Day, *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 146–47.

528. Ford Foundation, *Annual Report*, 1969, 3; Carnegie Corporation, *Annual Report*, 1968, 20.

529. Carnegie Corporation, *Annual Report*, 1968, 20.

530. Day, *Vanishing Vision*, 145–46.

531. Richard M. Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street: Origins of the Children's Television Workshop*, (Praeger Publishers: 1974), 2.

532. Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, 9.

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

534. 232.

535. Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, 25–26.

536. *Ibid.*, 26.

537. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

538. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 232.
539. Day, *Vanishing Vision*, 152.
540. Ibid., 152–53.
541. *Sesame Street Research: A 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium* (Children’s Television Workshop, 1990), 5.
542. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 234.
543. Day, *Vanishing Vision*, 160.
544. *Sesame Street Research: A 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium*, 15.
545. Ibid.
546. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 235–36.
547. “The World’s Longest Street,” *Sesame Workshop*,  
[http://www.sesameworkshop.org/aboutus/around\\_longest.php](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/aboutus/around_longest.php).
548. “Sesame Street Tops Guinness World Record with Most Emmys of All Time,” Press Release,  
3/23/2005, [http://www.sesameworkshop.org/aboutus/inside\\_press.php?contentId=14325318](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/aboutus/inside_press.php?contentId=14325318).