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Who Put the 'Fun' in Fundamentals?:

An Analysis on the factors behind the Birth and Success of the Edutainment Renaissance

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Introduction

In the summer of 2023, the Florida state government announced a partnership between its education system and conservative nonprofit PragerU. In this partnership, Florida schools would feature PragerU’s content in classrooms as supplemental materials for their history and social studies curriculum.¹ One PragerU video included in this deal, from their *Leo and Layla’s History Adventures* series, tells the story of Christopher Columbus’ voyages to the Americas, and was subject to recent controversy.² In the video, Columbus defends his enslavement of indigenous people to time-traveling characters Leo and Layla in a single striking sentence: “Being taken as a slave is better than being killed, no? I don’t see the problem”.³ Despite being highly controversial in its narrative surrounding slavery and by extension racism, PragerU defended the comment as historically accurate, the video remaining a part of Florida public school curriculum.⁴ This type of content is often referred to as ‘edutainment’, the combination of educational material with entertainment. PragerU’s conservative edutainment content serves as a stark contrast to the television programs and moments that popularized the genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s; diverse and comprehensive programs made in response to issues of violence and racism on television, and in the real world. This era constituted the edutainment renaissance, a rich and revolutionary moment in which the relationship between education and entertainment was forever redefined.

In the 1960s the entire television landscape was famously described as “vast wasteland” by FCC Chairman Newton Minow in a speech addressing the poor quality of contemporary

¹ Ayana Archie, “A Lot Is Happening in Florida Education. These Are Some of the Changes Kids Will See,” NPR, August 14, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/14/1193557432/florida-education-private-schools-prageru-desantis>.

² Ayana Archie, “A Lot Is Happening in Florida Education. These Are Some of the Changes Kids Will See,”

³ “Christopher Columbus : Explorer of the New World | Leo & Layla’s History Adventures | PragerU Kids,” YouTube, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ux54IJ06uHg>.

⁴ Ayana Archie, “A Lot Is Happening in Florida Education. These Are Some of the Changes Kids Will See,”

television programming, particularly calling out how broadcasters seemed to favor airing programs that were heavily commercialized, uninspired, loud, and of course, violent.⁵ Children's television was no exception to this scrutiny, kid's television shows the subject of constant judgement on the behalf of parents, advocacy groups, and government officials. Children's programming of the 1950s and 1960s was often criticized for being shallow and of poor influence, though the biggest critique across the board for children's shows was that the programming was excessively violent for young minds.⁶ However, as the decades transitioned from the 1960s into the 1970s, children's programming followed suit— a sudden shift from violent and distasteful to intentional and educational. In 1968, with the first airing of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, the United States got its first taste for the revolution in children's television that was soon to come. By the early 1970s, with the establishment of networks like PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and the introduction of television shows like *Sesame Street*, the edutainment renaissance was in full swing, and children's television would be forever changed.

Though what enabled this sudden shift? What sustained this shift? Could the birth of the edutainment renaissance have developed independently of public outcry against excessive television violence in children's lives, or was this shift entirely dependent on it? If so, was low tolerance for violence the only cause for this shift or were there elements of unease that encouraged this shift? While this project seeks to understand the making of the edutainment renaissance, what enabled its creation and what this renaissance itself was constituted of, its purpose is to situate this change within the moment of its creation. Political and social context is

⁵ Frank Orme, *Television for the Family: A Comprehensive Guide to Family Viewing* (Los Angeles, CA: National Association for Better Radio and Television , 1965).

⁶ Orme, *Television for the Family*, pp.75

crucial to assessing this argument, the start of the edutainment renaissance coinciding with the flickering end of an era of strong with a sense of justice and equality.

The edutainment renaissance was a direct byproduct of strong opposition to violence on television and the rejection of racism in children's programming, its successes driven by these factors and aided by co-opting aesthetics and themes of mainstream television without compromising the educating element. The events that led to the creation of programs like *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street* were responses to excessive violence, racism, and thoughtlessness present in children's media, designed to resituate the relationship between children and the television. These programs championed diversity and gentle kindness that complimented the educational content they presented, contributing to their iconic status and degree of success. The success of these programs was furthered by programs of the edutainment renaissance understanding the successes of mainstream television, such as formatting or characters, and utilizing these features in edutainment programs. Moreover, the educational content of the edutainment renaissance's programs in itself was a radical rejection of violence and racism in children's media. The edutainment renaissance sought to provide foundational education for disadvantaged children impacted by the ills of systemic racism, intending to create a more even playing field for children of all races, classes, and social backgrounds while highlighting those diverse same individuals on the television screen. These aspects combined created an undeniably unique moment in television history, programs of the edutainment renaissance successful in creating non-violent, anti-racist, and deeply entertaining content that maintained viewership as much as it successfully provided educational support to children across the country.

Who, What, When, Where, Why?

Since its inception television has had potential to educate the general public. While the intention of education was not prioritized by broadcasters or sponsors, educational content still found its way into homes through the airways. This project will assess television edutainment for children in the United States from the creation of the television in the late 1940s up until what I consider to be the 'edutainment renaissance' of the late 1960s to early 1970s. This era spans from approximately 1968-1974, in which the approach to edutainment television was revolutionized. This project will review the content and context surrounding children's programs, those designed solely to entertain and those that may be classified as edutainment.

Edutainment within the context of this project will solely refer to television, though it is important to note that edutainment can reference anything from books to boardgames as long as it is both educational and entertaining. Edutainment within the context of this project will also refer specifically to media intended for child audiences aged between two and ten years old, despite edutainment not being specific to children, teens, or adults in practice. Edutainment is also non-specific in terms of what can be defined as educational, though many edutainment programs opt to feature topics such as english, math, or science as the focus of their educational content, anything from cooking to camping can be utilized as the focus of edutainment programming. Despite a broad definition, edutainment does most often refer to the style of content that came after the late 1960s, content that focuses on integrating educational themes or lessons into content designed to emulate other available entertainment. For instance, despite a cooking show such as Julia Child's *The French Chef*, which was PBS's first program, being

educational whilst having entertainment value, it's uncommon for this program to be referred to as edutainment.⁷

Additionally, programs part of the edutainment renaissance, such as *Sesame Street* or *Schoolhouse Rock!*, tend to omit violent content due to the nature of their creation being rooted in response to dissatisfaction with children's programs exhibiting excessive violence. To understand just how the programs of the edutainment renaissance omit violence, it's crucial to understand what violence looked like in earlier programming. The definition of violence within the context of this project is largely guided by what primary sources constituted as violence in children's television. When addressing violence in children's television, I am specifically referring to physical acts of violence that include fighting, slapstick, or physical threats. Think of fights between Batman and the Joker, Bugs Bunny aiming a shotgun at Elmer Fudd, or any of Tom and Jerry's antics. Other definitions of violence, such as emotional violence, racial violence, and systemic violence, were not considered as violence in the same regard as physical violence. These alternative definitions are often referred to as 'distress', and not as heavily scrutinized. Alternative definitions of violence outside of physicality will still be thematically addressed within this project, just not directly as violence in the literal sense within reference to children's television.

⁷ "History," PBS, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/press-releases/topic/history/>.

Means and Methods

At the core of this project, in its development, research, and creation, is a deep love for children's television and education, of course. However, contrary to what you may think, primary research for this project did not solely exist in front of the television screen watching hours of *Sesame Street* re-runs or old cartoons. Research for this project was broad in its scope and mediums reviewed. This project benefitted from research in Southern California, Virginia, and New York City. In each of these places a new, vital piece of information entered the 'Works Cited' list of this project, featuring television records from UCSB's own library archives, near-impossible to find documents on key organizations from Washington and Lee University in Virginia, and a humble but compelling section from comic book once in a personal archive in New York City.

In an unexpected turn, outdated blogs, online forums, and hobby archives resulted in being the most important tools in locating primary sources I had. These unusual secondary sources introduced me to newspaper articles, organizations, and discourse that would have been impossible to find without their guidance and helpful responses to my emails asking for their sources. However, as vital as niche areas of the internet were to the development of this thesis, secondary sources I reviewed were absolutely crucial in developing an argument surrounding the primary causes behind the making of the edutainment renaissance and its successes.

The most important works in shaping my arguments came from 2003 dissertation *What TV Taught: Children's Television and Consumer Culture from "Howdy Doody" to "Sesame Street"* by J. Spencer Downing, *Radical Play: Revolutionizing Children's Toys in 1960s and 1970s America* by Rob Goldberg, and *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell: Three Decades of Network Children's Television* by Joseph Turow. Each of these texts have different

focal points, children's consumer culture on television, the evolution of toys in the 1960s and 70s, and what the relationship between consumerism, education, and television between the 1950s and 1980s, but address the whys and hows of the edutainment renaissance. All authors agree on the same contributing factors behind such a remarkable shift in television, though disagree on which factor was the most important. I also disagree on what they find most important in this shift.

Downing argues that children's television evolved around the concept of maintaining children as a consumer market, children's television blocks dominated by cheaply made programs and advertisements before the edutainment renaissance came around— and that this is reflected in the strategy shows like *Sesame Street* assumed which made them so successful.⁸ *Sesame Street's* ability to 'sell knowledge' it's greatest factor behind its success.⁹ Goldberg, despite not focusing on television as a core pillar of his research, argues that the toy market went through a transformation rather similar to that of children's television.¹⁰ Goldberg claims public outcry and a lowered social tolerance for things like violence, poor racial representation, and gendered stereotyping altering what became available to children in consumer spaces, including on the television.¹¹ Turow argues that concerns over the content of children's television was inconsistent across subjects in different advocacy groups, though violence and diversity were commonly agreed upon gripes with children's television, complaints over violence far more consistent than complaints over lack of diversity, which Turow claims to have appeared in blips without the same degree of momentum.¹² According to Turow, these claims themselves were

⁸ Downing, J. S. (2003). *What TV Taught: Children's Television and Consumer Culture from "Howdy Doody" to "Sesame Street"* (Order No. 3129700). pp. iv

⁹ Downing, *What TV Taught*, pp.iv

¹⁰ Rob Goldberg, *Radical Play: Revolutionizing Children's Toys in 1960s and 1970s America* Rob Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023). pp. 6

¹¹ Rob Goldberg, *Radical Play*, pp.14

¹² Turow, Joseph. *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell: Three Decades of Network Children's Television* (New York, N.Y: Praeger, 1981) pp. 5

important to the evolution of children's television, though not entirely responsible for the onslaught of new edutainment television in the 1970s, Turow attributing the influx of edutainment television to the federal support of public broadcasting.¹³ Each of these authors provide complex, well researched arguments, though I believe they all place too great of an importance on the role consumer culture played in effecting this shift.

¹³ Turow, Joseph. *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell*, pp. 7

Section 1: Context to Children's Television Discourse

Section 1.1 - The Television; A Brief History

In the year 1950, less than ten percent of American households owned television sets.¹⁴ By 1960, over ninety percent of American households owned one.¹⁵ In just a decade, the television turned from an exorbitantly expensive novelty into our collective teacher, reporter, jester, friend. So, to what can we attribute this meteoric rise in television ownership?

After World War II, the United States had a flourishing industrial economy, leading to the rapid expansion of the country's middle class. Advertisers, hungry for the American public's newfound disposable income, sold them a beautiful lie: that their goods could wash away years of economic depression and wartime horror, and bring about a new, homogenous, consumer society.¹⁶ However, television's burgeoning role in American culture and society wasn't solely a result of everyday people buying the 'next big thing'.

Television offered something new and unique to the entertainment market of the midcentury United States. The television brought video entertainment into the home, more convenient than going to see a film and more stimulating than radio, so much so that cinema attendance and radio ratings alike decreased in tandem with the increase in television ownership.¹⁷ From its inception, the television offered high quality, consistently scheduled programming designed to bring viewers in and keep them there. The cultural conversation once dominated by radio shows and moviegoing experiences was slowly but surely giving way to

¹⁴ Markert, John. "Golden Age of Television: Research Starters: EBSCO Research," EBSCO, 2023, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/golden-age-television>.

¹⁵ Turow, Joseph. *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell*, pp. 1

¹⁶ Downing, *What TV Taught*, pp.48

¹⁷ Edgerton, Gary R. *Columbia History of American Television*. Columbia University Press, 2009. pp.1-18

increasingly popular programs such as *Howdy Doody*, drawing in even larger audiences which in turn contributed to the television's cultural footprint. Broadcasting companies such as radio's NBC and ABC as well as newcomers like television's own Du Mont saw promise in television as both an exciting storytelling medium and an untapped market for an increasingly powerful advertising industry. High quality and plentiful television programming was designed to draw in a large audience for the sake of luring advertisers to buy advertising space on their networks, resulting in a lot of new and experimental television shows in all genres – especially in children's programming.¹⁸ The child audience was especially lucrative, especially considering that among early television hits prior to 1950, the children's television show *Howdy Doody*, a western and circus themed variety show featuring puppets, drew in larger audiences than revered news programs like *Meet the Press*.¹⁹

It comes as no surprise that children's programming amassed a large viewership in the changing cultural landscape of the United States. The post-war culture following World War II championed concepts of conformity, suburbia, and the nuclear family made up of a working father, stay-at-home mother, and about two children. For these families living new and inherently disconnected suburban lives, the television became the center of leisure in the home and the core of connection and community. This was especially true for stay-at-home mothers and children, who became the prime audiences for both broadcasting and advertising via the television, due to the great deal of time they spent in the home, and in turn in front of the television. But what kept audiences in front of the television? What exactly did television look like for children prior to the edutainment golden age of the late 1960s and early 1970s?

¹⁸ Downing, *What TV Taught* pp.67

¹⁹ Downing, *What TV Taught* pp.67

Section 1.2 - What Were Youngsters Watching?

As with everything on television in the era, children's television prior to the boom in edutainment television in the late 1960s and early 1970s consisted mainly of television shows and advertisements, with the occasional television movie (most common around the holidays) or public service announcements (PSAs), which would later coincide with the edutainment renaissance that came in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As television evolved from its inception in the late 1940s and networks were able to pull in a sizable audience, advertisers and sponsors were quick to create specific marketing campaigns and commercials for the child audience. Child audiences would go on to share what they saw advertised on TV to their parents, who would in turn buy what their children wanted. Though this was true with all advertising, television offered a form of advertising that combined the best parts of radio advertising and print advertising; the audio and visual. Now children, no matter how young, could tell their parents both the name of the item they wanted and what it looked like. In some cases, the television shows themselves were turned into a tool for marketing, selling toys and other goods in reference to the show. An excellent example of this is seen through 1955's *Mickey Mouse Club*, a variety show which solidified Disney's brand identity through mouse ears, song, and animation.²⁰ The popularity of *Mickey Mouse Club* served as an advertising tool not only because it drew large audiences very appealing to potential advertisers, but also because the content of the show in itself was an

²⁰ Marsha Kinda and Jyotsna Kapur. "Out of Control: Television and the Transformation of Childhood in Late Capitalism," essay, in *Kids' Media Culture* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 122–36.

advertisement. Children who liked the *Mickey Mouse Club*, when advertised Mickey ears like those worn by the cast, will ask their parents to buy those very same Mickey ears.

Some of the most common features of children's programming between 1947 and 1969 were puppets, animated characters, and zany actors— much like what children saw on programs like *Mickey Mouse Club*.²¹ Early children's television programs, primarily those that aired between 1947 and 1951, were heavily influenced by vaudeville acts, circus and western themes, established fantasy stories from across cultures and histories (think Davy Crockett or Rapunzel), and children's radio shows.²² These influences are especially apparent in the aesthetic and comedic stylings of popular shows of the era like *Howdy Doody*, *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*, and *Bozo the Clown*. The thematic trend towards vaudeville and circus acts ended as more households bought televisions, networks opted to experiment further with the type of programming created for children, particularly through new genres. By 1955, animation and variety shows had hit children's television, most notably that of the previously mentioned *Mickey Mouse Club*, which combined the variety approach with animated bits, and further established Disney characters like Mickey Mouse in the cultural zeitgeist, and later, consumer market. From this moment, animated programs became more prevalent on children's networks, particularly after animation studio Hanna Barbera released more television shows in addition to its famous shorts, like that of *Tom and Jerry* that became Saturday morning cartoon staples.

During the 1960s is when the Saturday Morning Cartoon block was implemented by broadcasters to schedules across networks, further emphasising the importance animated programming held in at this time given the high viewership of Saturday morning programming.²³ By the 1960s, despite many programs from the 1940s and 1950s remaining in syndication,

²¹ Kinder, Marsha and Kapur, Jyotsna. "Out of Control: Television and the Transformation of Childhood in Late Capitalism," essay, in *Kids' Media Culture*. 122–136.

²² Turow, . *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.33

²³ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.64

children's entertainment dominantly fell into the action/adventure genre or the comedy genre with the genres most heavily reflected in animated programming. Storybook and fantasy genres declined majorly in network presence, while science fiction genres boomed.²⁴ The slapstick comedy genre had carried over from earlier cartoon theming in the 1940s and 1950s, characterized by comedically exaggerated and creative acts of violence. There was significant crossover between the action/adventure and slapstick comedy genres, especially in science fiction settings. Some cartoons of the 1960s that reflect this fusion of violent comedy and adventure were *Courageous Cat and Minute Mouse*, *Frankenstein Jr. and the Impossibles*, and *Secret Squirrel*. This combination of violent comedy and action/adventure shows often produced superheroes, spies, and adventurers as protagonists, these figures dominating the leading roles in children's television content. Through these upstanding characters, each program communicated themes of law, order, and morality, commonly in line with patriotic American values.²⁵ In a time where those who questioned law, order, and morality were met with violence for speaking out, namely those a part of the Civil Rights movement or anti-war movement within the context of the 1960s, the easily dismissable depictions of cartoon violence sent a message. Children watching learned that law, order, and morality were to be upheld by 'good guys' and that those who questioned or violated these things should expect to meet violence that is simultaneously justifiable and normal, not a big deal.

However, not all children's television between the 1950s and 1960s was solely for entertainment's sake. Prior to the edutainment renaissance, edutainment was introduced to children's programming as a 'non-fiction' category of entertainment for kids. Programming like *The Romper Room* mimicked a classroom environment by featuring a teacher and pre-school

²⁴ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.64

²⁵ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.66

aged students, though the primary goal of these programs was more often to match what a child may experience in pre-school, by teaching songs and cooperation rather than standard educational topics as expected of similar programming in years to come. One program of note which ran from 1954-1957, a summer program aptly titled *Summer School*, was designed to deliver lectures on a variety of topics like travel, literature, and even body building.²⁶

Programming categorized as ‘non-fiction’ in the mid to late 1950s out-numbered the amount of fantasy or performance based programs such as *Howdy Doody*, though they lacked in relative popularity and cultural impact by comparison to its more fantastical counterparts.²⁷ This did not dissuade networks from releasing children’s educational non-fiction television programming. In the early 1960s, networks continued to create educational non-fiction shows that could be found in the TV guide, though in significantly lesser numbers compared to the 1950s. These programs followed suit with those of the 1950s in terms of content, this time with a particular industry wide focus on travel and literature in programs like *Discovery* and *Reading Room*.²⁸ Unlike educational programming of the 1950s, the educational programming of the early 1960s was the result of an increasing amount of pressure placed on broadcasting networks on the behalf of the FCC, which federally regulated television content, and parental organizations in response to the decreasing quality of children’s television.

²⁶ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.34

²⁷ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.34

²⁸ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp.51

Section 1.3 - Major Critiques of Children's Television

The quality of children's programming had always been hotly contested by the media, parents, teachers, activists, and politicians, though amplified in the 1960s. The critiques over what children were not always necessarily uniform, complaints vast in range as viewers raised their concerns over everything from programs featuring women criminals to episodes reading more like toy advertisements than entertainment.²⁹ However, the most common critiques across concerned individuals over children's television content came down to general lack of quality, racist stereotyping, and most notably excessive violence.

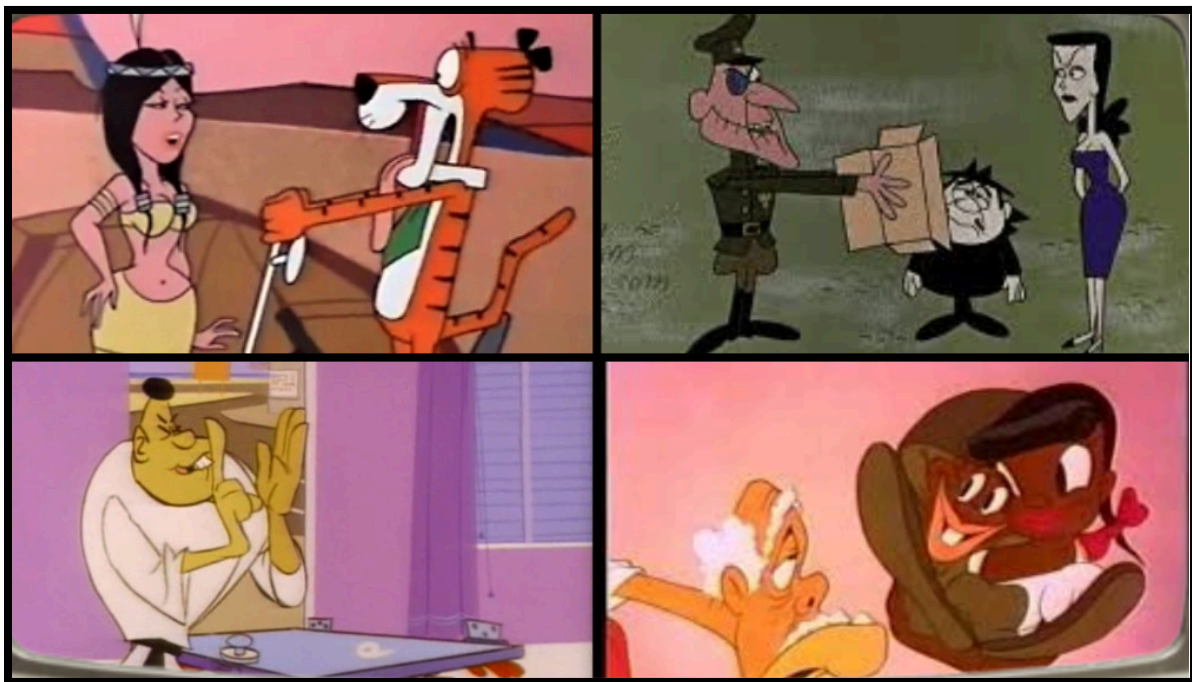


Figure 1. From left to right, Cool Cat in *Merrie Melodies* "Injun Trouble" (1969), Fearless Leader, Borris Badenov, and Natasha Fatale in *Rocky, Bullwinkle, and Friends* "Missouri Mish Mash" (1961), Karate in *Batfink* (1967), Prince Charming, Dopey the Dwarf, and Coal Black in *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarves* (1943)

²⁹ Orme, *Television for the Family*. pp.70

Quality is often hard to measure in this respect, as everyone had vastly different definitions as to what constituted a quality program. However, in reference to children's television critics would often label programs as 'low quality' when a program lacked elements of education, culture, or moral guidance in-line with popular contemporary values. For instance, many critics held *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* in higher regards compared to other programming due to the content of the show falling in-line with what constituted this definition of quality.³⁰ *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* was an animated variety show that featured an all-American leading cast of Rocky the flying squirrel and Bullwinkle the moose from Minnesota, two friends who help out the US government in contrast to their soviet-coded villains Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale, who constantly try to disrupt the activities of Rocky, Bullwinkle, and United States in general in the name of their Fearless Leader.³¹ In addition to the adventures Rocky and Bullwinkle had with their foreign adversaries, the show also featured shorts with poetry, fairytales, and global history with Peabody and Sherman.³² *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* not only featured some of the educational and cultural factors critics wanted in programming, but morals that aligned with American values and good citizenship. Programs that lacked any of these features, in addition to poor production quality or poor writing, were subject to being deemed of 'poor quality' by critics.

³⁰ Lawrence Laurent "NAFBRAT Report." Washington Post, March 13th, 1968.

³¹ Bill Scott and Jay Ward. *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* (ABC, 1959).

³² Scott and Ward, *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* (ABC, 1959).



Figure 2. From left to right, Tom, Jerry, and Spike from *Tom and Jerry* “The Truce Hurts” (1948) , Hadji and Professor Quest from *Jonny Quest* “Calcutta Adventure” (1964), Dino Boy and Ugh from *Space Ghost* “The Web/ The Sacrifice/ The Homing Device.”(1966), and Bugs Bunny and the Hound in *Hare Rabbitt* (1944).

Critiques over racist stereotyping and caricatures in media had been in constant supply pre-dating the television.³³ As television came into the picture and broadcasters needed more material to air, racist film shorts of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly of the animated variety, ended up on children’s television blocks.³⁴ Syndicated racist shorts in partnership with newer programs or episodes that featured racially stereotyped characters generated a lot of concern from critics, especially in light of the developing Civil Rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One syndicated cartoon titled *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarves*, a racialized satire of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, had been under fire for its intense usage of racial

³³ Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films* (Amherst, Mass, London: University of Massachusetts Press ; Eurospan distributor, 2010). pp. 5

³⁴ Downing, *What TV Taught*, pp. 367

caricatures and stereotypes against African-Americans.³⁵ Set in the context of World War Two, this cartoon only featured heavily stereotyped African-American characters, such as a zoot-suit wearing, domino-and-gold toothed Prince-Charming and a red lipped, overly promiscuous Snow White adorned in tattered revealing clothing and pigtails with red bows.³⁶ Programming releasing new episodes to television, such as Hanna Barbera's *Tom and Jerry*, received criticism for featuring racially stereotyped characters, such as Mammy Two-Shoes, who was an African-American house-maid who fell in line with the mammy archetype and featured many other racist stereotypes in her depictions.³⁷ Most issues raised over racial stereotyping or caricatures regarded the depiction of Black and African-American characters, though there were concerns over racist depictions of characters of all racial backgrounds, most notably regarding Mexican stereotypes with Pepito from *Bucky and Pepito*(1960) and Asian stereotypes with Karate from *Batfink*(1966).³⁸

However, across all programming, including all programming already mentioned, critics took the most issue with the degree of excessive violence in children's shows. Children's programs that featured unserious and comedic plots typical of the cartoon genre, such as *Underdog*, received criticism for the violence depicted.³⁹ *Underdog* would receive criticism for violence over gags typical of cartoon violence, such as Underdog losing his memory in episode 'Forget-Me-Net', which prompted various other characters to attempt to correct his memory loss via hitting him on the head with bricks, shovels, and batons.⁴⁰ Syndicated programs that also

³⁵ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.76

³⁶ Merrie Melodies, "Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarves," *Super Cartoons*, <https://www.supercartoons.net/cartoon/coal-black-and-de-sebben-dwarfs/>

³⁷ Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.51

³⁸ Hal Erickson, *Television Cartoon Shows: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, 1949 through 1993* (Jefferson City, N.C: McFarland, 1995). pp. 112

³⁹ Orme, *Television for the Family: A Comprehensive Guide to Family Viewing*, pp.62

⁴⁰ Underdog. "Forget-Me-Net." *Youtube*, 15:38. May 1, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1H3ae6iu0s&t=947s>

featured standard cartoon violence once meant for adult theater-viewing like *Looney Tunes*, also received heavy criticism upon playing during Children's cartoon blocks.⁴¹ *Looney Tunes* short 'Hare Ribbin' was even edited for syndication after complaints over the excessively violent ending to the short, in which Bugs Bunny shoots a hunting dog through the mouth with a gun after the dog exclaims how he wishes to die, the dog initially having wanted to commit suicide.⁴²

For some programs, poor quality, racial stereotyping, and excessive violence were all cited as reasons the show was unacceptable for children's viewing. Popular genres in children's programming between the 1950s and 1960s, such as action, adventure, sci-fi, and westerns, were in many cases synonymous with these complaints due to the subject matter of the programming. A prime example frequently mentioned by critics for being poor in quality, racially insensitive, and excessively violent is *Jonny Quest*, an sci-fi action-adventure cartoon about a crime and mystery solving group of two men, two boys, and a dog.⁴³ A key feature of *Jonny Quest* was constant fighting and peril-driven situations, amounting in a great number of shoot-outs, knife fights, and other life-threatening situations. In the episode, 'Calcutta Adventure', there are multiple distinct and overt instances of violence as the Quest crew recalls the adventure in which they adopt the only non-white main character, Hadji.⁴⁴ Displayed acts of violence include targeted gun violence, stabbing attempts, chemical weaponry, and kidnapping.⁴⁵ There are also multiple allusions to murder, as well as characters shooting other characters down, though there is no direct depiction of death, blood, or injury.⁴⁶ *Jonny Quest* also features a multitude of racialized stereotypes, most notably regarding the leading character, Hadji, who is a dark-skinned

⁴¹ The Censored Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies Guide, accessed February 05, 2026, <https://www.intanibase.com/gac/looneytunes/censored>.

⁴² The Censored Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies Guide

⁴³ Orme, *Television for the Family: A Comprehensive Guide to Family Viewing*. pp. 71

⁴⁴ Jonny Quest, "Calcutta Adventure," *Daily Motion* video, July 5, 2021, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x82h8gf>

⁴⁵ Jonny Quest, "Calcutta Adventure,"

⁴⁶ Jonny Quest, "Calcutta Adventure,"

Indian boy who wears a turban, and the main cast's weekly villains. This is exemplified in 'Calcutta Adventure', in which Hadji's backstory is introduced, revealing him to have been a mystic, snake-charming orphan who helped the rest of the *Jonny Quest* crew escape dark-skinned and heavily accented assassins before he was adopted into the main cast.⁴⁷ The program was also deemed low-quality due to the animation style and lack of educational or cultural value.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Jonny Quest, "Calcutta Adventure,"

⁴⁸ Orme, *Television for the Family: A Comprehensive Guide to Family Viewing*. pp. 37

Section 2: Section 2: Causes and Concerns

Section 2.1 - Television, Children, and the Real World

James Baldwin once wrote, “The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality.”⁴⁹ This remark doesn’t simply apply to parents, but to. Across societies and cultures, the collective, the countless parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, teachers, government officials, and friends who make up a child’s community takes upon themselves the responsibility to offer each successive generation the very best. It can be easy to dismiss children’s media as a vehicle for advertising, mindless entertainment meant to occupy time rather than stimulate the mind. But just like we expect parents and caregivers to provide children with a balanced diet, so should we expect the creators of children’s media to craft entertainment balanced with morality and educational elements. Naturally, different groups throughout the decades following television’s rise differed in their views of what qualified as ‘balanced.’

To better understand the critiques of children’s television going into the late 1960s, it’s crucial first to understand what else was going on in the United States at this moment, both on and off the television. The late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States was largely characterized by civil unrest following a variety of progressive social movements, primarily the anti-segregation Civil Rights Movement and protests against the Vietnam War. Though separate in focus, the movements were united in their goals of putting an end to American systems of unequal violence and oppression, at home and abroad. Both movements questioned the authority of the government and the morality of the law within the United States, while giving antiracist

⁴⁹ James Baldwin, “Notes on the House of Bondage,” *The Nation*, November 1, 1980.

and anti-war ideologies a chance to flourish in the public consciousness. This was especially true for the civil rights movement and its successors, such as The Black Panthers, who sought eradicate systemic racism through internalized Black community efforts.⁵⁰ The civil unrest brought on by the protestors involved with these movements and organizations was seldom violent, though demonstrators were often painted as violent instigators and aggressively targeted by both counterprotestors and law enforcement.⁵¹ Protestors who sought to reduce and correct the injustice of violence through non-violent civil disobedience, protest, and disruption were met with that same violence, recordings of the violence they faced broadcasted on televisions across America.

This showcase of real-world, televised violence against disruptors, law breakers, and those who denied the authority of law enforcement coincided with a popular rise in crime-fighters and do-gooders as program protagonists, whether they be superheroes, spies, or otherwise. Through the promotion of such characters in children's shows, networks were sending a direct message to children to honor law and order, not to question or fight against it. This was further reinforced by a stark lack of racial and ethnic diversity in these programs' protagonists. The vast majority of children's show protagonists in the 1960s were either animals or white people, almost always American. In contrast, antagonists and side characters had a much wider range of racial and ethnic diversity, but even this level of diversity remained an exception rather than the rule in children's media. Through the portrayal of racial and ethnic minorities in inferior and immoral positions as subordinates, villains, and enemies to the American state, it was made clear to child audiences that fear, distaste, and even hateful, violent attitudes towards people from

⁵⁰ The Black Panthers. "The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program." Oakland, California, October 15, 1966.

⁵¹ Stephen Zunes and Jesse Laird, "The US Civil Rights Movement (1942-1968)," CNCR, March 9, 2022, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/us-civil-rights-movement-1942-1968/>.

different racial and ethnic backgrounds was not only acceptable, but encouraged.⁵² Indirectly, racialized negative character portrayals alongside law-and-order driven, all-American protagonists opposed and undermined the Civil Rights movement's fight for racial equality.

Looming over the domestic turmoil wrought by protests movements and their opponents was the Cold War, its cultural and nuclear threats lynchpins of American popular culture. The Cold War presented Americans with a variety of new anxieties post World War II, predominantly regarding the future of science, the future of America, and the alleged threat of communism. In many ways, the television and the Cold War developed alongside each other: guides on stocking fallout shelters, civil defense, and instructions for what to do under atomic, biological, or chemical attack were broadcast across numerous channels well into the 1960s.⁵³ The anticommunist rhetoric propagated by the American government and industry leaders in popular culture following the end of World War 2 naturally bled into the development of early American television.⁵⁴ Specifically, these Cold War anxieties were disseminated in children's programming through the increasingly popular science fiction genre (especially with regards to the ongoing Space Race), and portrayals of immoral, scheming, communist villains, complete with Slavic-names and Eastern-European-accents, or through science fiction settings, with many programs presenting both.

One stark example of Cold War influence seeping into children's television lies within *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends*, which encapsulated American ideals, bias against the Soviet Union, and themes of science fiction despite not being in the science fiction genre. In the show's first season, the Space Race acts as a central plotline when Rocky and Bullwinkle accidentally

⁵² Klein, Hugh, and Kenneth S. Shiffman. 2006. "Race-Related Content of Animated Cartoons." *Howard Journal of Communications*, pp. 1- 8

⁵³ "Media and Cold War America" (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, February 12, 2021).

⁵⁴ "Media and Cold War America"

create a powerful rocket fuel that shoots them to the moon (whilst trying to bake a cake).⁵⁵ This season debuted in 1959, prior to the first successful human space trip. Throughout the series, Rocky and Bullwinkle are tasked with recreating this cake/rocket fuel by the United States government, but are consistently foiled by the Soviet-adjacent spies, Natasha Fatale and Boris Badenov.⁵⁶ Natasha and Boris, their immoral nature communicated by both their Soviet-sounding names and their incorporation of the words “bad” and ‘fatal.’ Natasha and Boris are depicted as villainous, conniving, and violently anti-American. Natasha and Boris’ dubious nature contrast the cheerful all-American Rocky and Bullwinkle, serving as clear commentary on not only how American children were meant to view Soviets (and by extension communists), but how they were supposed to view American/Soviet relations.

As discussed earlier, children are not only exposed to media deemed appropriate for their age groups. The subtext of children’s shows were complemented by the comparatively straight-forward messaging of adult-oriented fiction, talk shows, and of course, the news. The television was an unrestricted frontier within the household, offering children access to whatever broadcasters chose to play, provided a child’s parent didn’t know or care what they were watching. To no surprise, the events that led to more subtle commentary on law, order, race, and America’s enemies in children’s media were displayed and discussed in full on other channels and television shows. Moments from the Vietnam War were played in graphic detail, one live broadcast from February 24th, 1965 on CBS showing the carnage of war in real-time. This news special on the Viet Cong’s war tactics showed graphic footage of American soldiers being shot at and bombed, as well as their bodies in the aftermath.⁵⁷ Special television news films on protests during the Civil Rights Movement offered both legitimized segregationists and everyday racists a

⁵⁵ Scott, Bill and Ward, Jay. s.1 ep.1, *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* (ABC, 1959).

⁵⁶ Scott, whole, *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends*

⁵⁷ Walter Kronkite and Charles Kiralt, “Behind Viet Cong Lines”, CBS, Feb. 24 1965

platform, and showed protesters being jailed for peaceful civil disobedience.⁵⁸ Perhaps the most impactful and violent topics available for all to see as long as they had a television, were the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. While it is blatantly false to imply children had been sheltered from the violence of the world they live in and the news cycle, they had never been exposed to it in such a way that you could witness the death of a man from the ‘comfort’ of your living room.

What children were actually exposed to via television in the 1960s is addressed in a thread on popular discussion forum Reddit, in the r/AskOldPeople community. The users who have responded to this thread have all been confirmed as real users, and given consent to have their responses used as evidence within the context of this paper. User EthanRotman asks the question, “As a kid in the 60s, what are your memories of TV?”⁵⁹ A commenter called Reesesbigcup recalled “One of my earliest memories is the time of the JFK assassination, I was 4 yrs old, and all my kid TV shows were not on for days.”⁶⁰ Another commenter on the same forum, Squonkman61, wrote “...being scared out of wits by the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968. The sounds and images terrified me. I couldn’t sleep for 3 nights, and when I finally did fall asleep I immediately had a dream about Sirhan Sirhan, the assassin.”⁶¹ Furthermore, many other users on the thread admitted to watching adult-oriented television programs, from horror programs to racy dramas, which certainly weren't made for children.⁶² While many things can be taken away from the lived experiences of those who were children in the 1960s, the most important thing is that children were exposed to a lot of content not meant for them, including a plethora of real-world violence.

⁵⁸ Chet Huntley. “Sit In”, NBC, December 20th, 1960.

⁵⁹ EthanRotman, “As a Kid in the 60s, What are Your Memories of TV?,” Reddit, 2024

⁶⁰ Reesesbigcup, “As a Kid in the 60s, What are Your Memories of TV?,” Reddit, 2024

⁶¹ Squonkman61, “As a Kid in the 60s, What are Your Memories of TV?,” Reddit, 2024

⁶² Squonkman61, “As a Kid in the 60s, What are Your Memories of TV?,” Reddit, 2024

Section 2.2 - Major Critics of Children's Television

Though there were many individual critics of children's television across the United States in homes, schools, and offices, most of their voices were not heard on a national level. However, there were a multitude of organized groups who voiced their collective concerns representing parents, teachers, psychologists, and more against objectionable content in children's media. Some to note are the National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA), Action for Children's Television (ACT), the NPTA advocated most for educational television and ACT for less advertising in children's television. However, three key players had gotten the attention of the public, the media, and most importantly, the broadcasters more so than other groups or individuals. These key players, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association for Better Radio and Television (NAFBRAT), and the United States Government, were able to enact change through various means of making their critiques known.

The NAACP was not solely concerned with what was on children's television, so much as it was concerned with what was broadcast on television and present in other forms of popular media. Within the context of children's television, the NAACP specifically protested the continued syndication of racist cartoons during children's television blocks. The NAACP's primary target in this effort were racist cartoons from the 1940s and 1950s, primarily from the Merrie Melodies series. The NAACP had been advocating for the dismissal and removal of these cartoons from syndication since their debuts, though networks ignored their requests, the protested cartoons remaining in syndication well into the 1960s.⁶³ It is important to note that many of these syndicated cartoons were often played to fill airtime on children's television

⁶³ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.76

blocks, the addition of these cartoons having created a wider variety in content to satiate bored audiences.⁶⁴ Many of the programs under the NAACP's scrutiny were initially intended for adult, theatrical audiences, not for broadcast to child audiences. The issue of removing racist cartoons became a de facto issue of moderating the content of children's television. While many other groups voiced their concerns and protested the presence of any and all racial stereotyping in children's programming, the NAACP was the most consistent in its complaint and effective in evoking change.⁶⁵

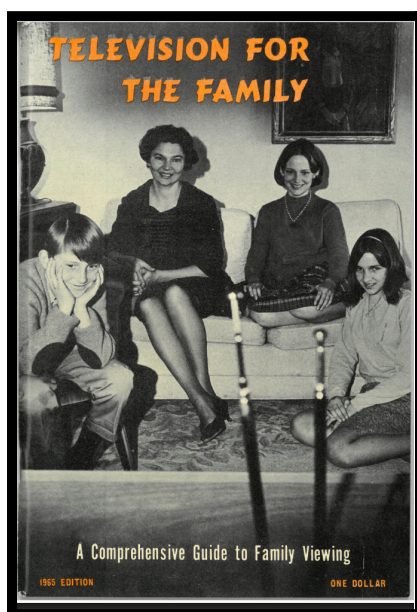


Figure 3. *Television for the Family: A Comprehensive Guide to Family Viewing*. NAFBRAT's annual report on television programming. Edited by Frank Orme, Distributed by NAFBRAT.

NAFBRAT was perhaps the most influential and certainly the most vocal group among the three to impact the realities of children's television. NAFBRAT was a self-proclaimed "non-profit corporation dedicated to the advancement of the public's interests in the broadcasting

⁶⁴ Downing, *What TV Taught*, pp. 367

⁶⁵ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.52

industry.”⁶⁶ Initially composed of just a single chapter of twelve housewives based out of Los Angeles, the group expanded nationally to employ 43 chapter directors under a president, vice president, and secretary.⁶⁷ NAFBRAT operated between 1951 and 1968, before a name change to the National Association of Better Broadcasting, after which the organization’s activities tapered out before fading into obscurity.⁶⁸ During their active years, NAFBRAT’s ultimate aim as a group was to create a collaborative effort between the public and broadcasters to ensure programming was held to the standards NAFBRAT believed the American public deserved.⁶⁹ In an introductory document meant to inform attendees of the 1965 Dupont Awards on NAFBRAT as an organization, the group described their role as such:

“NAFBRAT serves the public through the annual studies of children’s programs, the publishing of a guide to better programs, and the conducting of studies and surveys. This information and reprints of current materials in the field are made available to members through quarterly bulletins. Another service provides information and materials in answer to requests from religious leaders, teachers, students, universities, libraries – requests from all over the United States and foreign countries... NAFBRAT, in its work of surveying and evaluating and continuing to inform public opinion, stands dedicated to the advancement of the public’s interest in the broadcasting industry.”⁷⁰

NAFBRAT as an organization stood not only as a representative of public opinion on children’s television, but a moral guide for those less involved in and informed about the domain of

⁶⁶ “A Tip of the Hat to NAFBRAT,” *Our Sunday Visitor*, July 26, 1965.

⁶⁷ “A Tip of the Hat to NAFBRAT,” *Our Sunday Visitor*

⁶⁸ Frank Orme, ed., *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION* (Los Angeles, CA: NAFBRAT, 1965). pp. 3

⁶⁹ Orme, *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION*. pp.1

⁷⁰ Orme, *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION*. pp.3

broadcasting. As with many (if not most) groups that claim to represent the view and will of the general public, it is difficult to evaluate the degree to which NAFBRAT's views reflected popular opinion. Especially because their efforts were made without direct collaboration with the general public or broadcasters.⁷¹ However, the group's impact on children's television cannot be ignored.

NAFBRAT utilized a variety of methods to expand their reach and influence, including letter writing campaigns, dissemination of petitions, and an annual publication of reports on the content of children's television programs. These lengthy publications were what NAFBRAT was most well known for, their 1965 report containing reviews and ratings for over 300 popular ongoing and syndicated programs.⁷² These reports rated programs as poor, objectionable, fair, good, or excellent, partnered with viewing suggestions (or dramatic warnings) for families, teens, and children.⁷³ To arrive at their conclusions, NAFBRAT reviewers employed a rating system containing 10 standards programs had to feature to receive their endorsements. These standards ranged from straightforward and concrete to wildly subjective, from "Does it appeal to the audience for whom intended?" to "Does it add to one's understanding and appreciation of himself, others, and the world?" and "Crime is *never suitable* as a major theme of a program for children."⁷⁴ As made apparent by the criteria regarding crime as a major theme in children's programming, NAFBRAT took prime issue with the excessive violence and criminal themes and subject material in children's programming.

As NAFBRAT's influence grew, national news outlets offered their representatives increasingly more byline space and airtime, rendering the group infamous among television network executives.⁷⁵ In 1960, NBC president Bob Wood went as far as to deny NAFBRAT's

⁷¹ Orme, *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION*. pp.1

⁷² Orme, *Television for the Family*, pp. 1-6

⁷³ Orme, *Television for the Family*, pp. 1-6

⁷⁴ Orme, *Television for the Family*, pp. 72

⁷⁵ Orme, *Television for the Family*, pp. 1-6

influence on the changing landscape of NBC's children's television offerings, unprompted.⁷⁶ This same recognition also brought NAFBRAT to the attention of the federal government. According to the organization, between 1954 and 1961 NAFBRAT had participated in Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency and White House conferences on children and the youth, organization president Clara Logan often serving as a witness and acting on the behalf of her organization.⁷⁷ Some retired government officials who had formerly worked with NAFBRAT in these hearings or conferences would go on to become involved as senior members in the organization, most notably former Senator, Thomas J. Dodd, and former Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, James V. Bennett.⁷⁸

NAFBRAT's involvement with the federal government introduces the United States government as another of the three key players in bringing change to children's television, the government playing a particularly important role in the pathway to the edutainment renaissance. Direct involvement between the United States government and broadcasters to effect change on television was relatively minimal prior to the edutainment renaissance. The most direct interaction between government and children's television came in the form of heavy restrictions on over-commercialization in children's programs on the behalf of the FCC, which held strict standards regarding advertising.⁷⁹ However, this didn't mean that the government took no interest in children's television throughout the 1950s and 60s.

In 1954, Senate subcommittee hearings on juvenile delinquency prompted an investigation into the relationship between juvenile delinquency and the media children consumed. This investigation primarily focused on the impact of crime and horror comic books rather than television, though it did set a precedent for later investigation of television's impact

⁷⁶ Jack Anderson, "What a Survey Says of Children's Shows," *Miami Herald*, March 17, 1965, 2 edition.

⁷⁷ Orme, *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION*. pp.3

⁷⁸ Orme, *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION*. pp.1

⁷⁹ Downing, J.S. *What TV Taught*. pp.76

on children's behavior.⁸⁰ *Superman*, for example, was subject to scrutiny in both the comic book and television mediums for excessive violence and overuse of crime as a major theme.⁸¹ The government would further attach concern to the connection between delinquency and television as the 1950s progressed into the 1960s, figures like James V. Bennett wrote in 1961 how television's influence on the youth was strong enough such that poor programming could lead them to ill decision making and criminality.⁸² This sentiment was echoed in the signing of the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961, which sought to provide federal assistance for projects which would demonstrate or develop techniques and practices leading to a solution of the Nation's juvenile delinquency control problems, and involved monitoring television in discussions surrounding the signing of the act.⁸³ This concern for violence appears once again in the federal consciousness in 1969, as then Surgeon General Jesse L. Steinfeld went forward with a formal study on the relationship between television and violence, known as the "Scientific Advisory Committee Report on Television and Social Behavior and its implications for the American people and the American television broadcasting industry."⁸⁴ This report was one of many studying the relationship between children, violence, and television at the time, a growing body of scholarship on the issue further encouraging federal investigation. Though the Surgeon General's report would not be concluded until 1972, its findings inconclusive on the relationship between violence, children, and television, this report reflected deep concern regarding the content of children's programming within the government as well as the American public, the very act of conducting the research validating fears across the country.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Downing, J.S. *What TV Taught*. Pp. 295

⁸¹ Orme, *NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BETTER RADIO AND TELEVISION*. pp.3

⁸² James V. Bennett, "STATEMENT FOR NAFBRAT" (Washington D.C: Washington D.C, December 11, 1961)

⁸³ Congress.gov. "Text - S.279 - 87th Congress (1961-1962): Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961." September 22, 1961. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/87th-congress/senate-bill/279/text>.

⁸⁴ Jesse L Steinfeld, rep., *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence* (Washington D.C.: National Institute of Mental Health, 1972).

⁸⁵ Jesse L Steinfeld, rep., *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence*

Government involvement in evoking change in children's television was not restricted to discussion or acts regarding the relationship between television violence, crime, and youth delinquency with the nation's children. At this point, many in government positions were recalling the potential of television to educate, and choosing to champion this potential in discussions regarding the relationship between children and television. This is first exemplified by the 1960 and 1964 Democratic Party platforms, both of which called for more educational television.⁸⁶ The 1964 Democratic Party platform specifically advocated for the allocation of funds towards nationwide, public, non-commercial, educational television.⁸⁷ Both the Educational Television Act of 1962 and the Democratic Party's 1964 platform served as a precursor for what was to come at the federal level: the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967.

Both acts allocated millions in funding to public television stations, however, the Educational Television Act of 1962 prioritized the creation of public television stations rather than funding the programs they were to air.⁸⁸ This was intended to ensure more Americans had access to existing educational television content for the betterment of culture.⁸⁹ The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a non-profit which would disburse taxpayer money to various public broadcasters (both television and radio) on the condition that they air programs beneficial to the educational and cultural wellbeing of the nation.⁹⁰ The Public Broadcasting Act was undeniably influenced by the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, a group founded in 1965 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York

⁸⁶ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, 1964 Democratic Party Platform, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273239>

⁸⁷ Peters and Woolley, 1964 Democratic Party Platform.

⁸⁸ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, John F. Kennedy, Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill Providing for Educational Television, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/236531>

⁸⁹ Alford, W. Wayne. "The Educational Television Facilities Act of 1962." *AV Communication Review* 15, no. 1 (1967): 76–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30217353>.

⁹⁰ Corporation for Public Broadcasting, "Public Broadcasting Act of 1967," Corporation for Public Broadcasting, accessed January 27, 2026, <https://cpb.org/about/public-broadcasting-act-1967>.

with the intent of creating superior television content that compared to other developed countries in terms of keeping their populations well-culturally educated via the airways.⁹¹ A key aspect of these acts, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, was creating public television that was not commercially motivated, educational, and solely created for the intent of improving public life. The Carnegie Commission on Educational Television also popularized the term ‘Public Television’, and created the report responsible for the initial details of the Public Broadcasting Act. Essentially, the Educational Television Act of 1962 and the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 were created with the intention to improve American lives through access to quality educational content via the television. The two acts were not solely intended for children’s television, though both benefitted children’s television programming the most.

⁹¹ Corporation for Public Broadcasting, “Public Broadcasting Act of 1967,”

Section 2.3 - Path to Change (and Public TV!)

By the late 1960s, children's television was on the brink of a massive change. Efforts of those invested in changing the realities of what children watched on their televisions daily had started to come to fruition, whether it be through critique and protest as organized by organizations like the NAACP and NAFBRAT, or through fiscal support and infrastructure provided by the United States government. This forthcoming change did not go unnoticed, as on March 22, 1968, author George Gent wrote for *The New York Times* that both NBC and CBS would be making major changes to children's television in favor of a more educational approach to entertainment.⁹²

“The announcements came in the wake of a report on Wednesday that an \$8-million experimental workshop to develop educational programs for pre-schoolers would be presented in the fall of 1969 on the National Education Television network. According to industry spokesman, the program changes are a response to the mounting criticism of excessive violence in children's shows by parents and educators.”⁹³

This report, though short and simple, speaks to the perfect storm of external factors that enabled this change. The most influential factor in this change is directly mentioned; relentless criticism for the excessive violence in children's television shows. Though, the protest against violent children's media came from all directions in this moment, prompted by worsening violence in children's shows in addition to a number of studies and investigations into the effects of violent

⁹² Gent, George. “N.B.C and C.B.S Announce Change in Children's TV.” *The New York Times*, March 22, 1968.

⁹³ Gent,. “N.B.C and C.B.S Announce Change in Children's TV.”

television on impressionable young minds. The discontentment over children's programming was only amplified by the collective violence of the 1960s, an already shrinking tolerance for televised violence outside the sphere of children's programming had been worsened by the extreme political violence of 1968, Vietnam war offensives and the assassinations of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy created a more fervent demand for less violent media.

Regarding racially insensitive programming, broadcasters were becoming increasingly aware of public distaste for racism in light of the successes and overall impact of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1968, eleven highly controversial racist cartoons by *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* were silently removed from airways, never to be seen on television screens again. Of these cartoons were *Hittin' the Trail for Hallelujah Land*, *Sunday Go to Meetin' Time*, *Clean Pastures*, *Uncle Tom's Bungalow*, *Jungle Jitters*, *The Isle Of Pingo Pongo*, *All This and Rabbit Stew*, *Coal Black and De Sebben Dwarfs*, *Tin Pan Alley Cats*, *Angel Puss*, and *Goldilocks and the Jivin' Bears*.⁹⁴ All of these cartoons had been in syndication since at least 1944, and had all been condemned for their racist stereotypes.⁹⁵ The stereotypes utilized in these cartoons not only depicted Black characters in line with Jim Crow caricatures, but also indulged in stereotypes that painted Black people as lazy, money-driven, dumb, and even cannibalistic. These programs are informally regarded as the Censored Eleven, pulled from syndication by United Artists to never be broadcast again.⁹⁶ Many networks followed suit, opting against airing syndicated cartoons featuring racist caricatures and stereotypes, particularly of Black people. This success in removing negative racial stereotypes from television can also be attributed to the active efforts of

⁹⁴ Joanna R. Smolko, "Southern Fried Foster: Representing Race and Place through Music in Looney Tunes Cartoons," *American Music* 30, no. 3 (October 1, 2012): pp. 344–72, <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.30.3.0344>.

⁹⁵ Smolko, "Southern Fried Foster," pp. 344-72

⁹⁶ Smolko, "Southern Fried Foster," pp. 344-72

the NAACP in protesting such content. *Tom and Jerry's* Mammy Two Shoes is an example of such.⁹⁷ Though the character was initially removed from appearing in new episodes after 1953, she remained in syndicated episodes well into the 1960s.⁹⁸ Upon further protest from the NAACP, Mammy Two Shoes was later replaced with a white character or completely removed from episodes in which she made appearances towards the late 1960s.⁹⁹ Ultimately, there was evidence that broadcasting racism was not only unfavorable, but downright unacceptable from an industry standpoint.

Mainstream broadcast networks began to understand that the change being called for in children's media was serious. In the late 1960s, many television shows that received complaints for violent content began to disappear from the children's television block hours, either due to cancellation or late-night rescheduling for more mature (teenaged) audiences.¹⁰⁰ CBS, for instance, opted to cancel further production of *Frankenstein Jr. and the Impossibles*, *The Superman-Aquaman Hour of Adventure*, and *Space Ghost*, each program the subject of scrutiny for violence depicted.¹⁰¹ The shows that took their place had a few marked changes, most notably a relative lack of violence. Many of these new shows also shifted away from the industry standard non-human, cartoon protagonists that defined the majority of the decade.¹⁰² Smash hits like *The Archie Show* and *Scooby Doo, Where Are You!* traded the violent fights and slapstick typical of the genre for chase scenes and silly arguments, not only retaining their viewership but spawning massive franchises which run to this day. *The Archie Show* first aired in 1968, focused on the adventures of characters from the Archie comic franchise with a consistent musical element, almost completely devoid of violence as Archie and Jughead go through their school

⁹⁷ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.51

⁹⁸ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.51

⁹⁹ Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon*, pp.52

¹⁰⁰ Gent, "N.B.C and C.B.S Announce Change in Children's TV."

¹⁰¹ Gent, "N.B.C and C.B.S Announce Change in Children's TV."

¹⁰² Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp. 101

days, dance, and play in their band. *Scooby Doo, Where Are You!* followed suit a year later in 1969, embracing the same approach to non-violence but through the lens of a mystery-solving crew similar to *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* that predated them. Both of these programs were able to maintain the unique comedy often attributed with cartoons of the era, just without the feature of excessive violence via gun fights or constant beatings. Some programs, such as *Wacky Races*, featured echoes of cartoon violence that had been critiqued in the past, though this violence was significantly reduced and the tone of these programs were much sillier than their predecessors, overall making the shows much more agreeable.

Though, beyond curtailing violence and racist attitudes in broadcast and syndicated mainstream programming at large, the Public Broadcasting Act played a deeply important role in the progression of children's television. Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers himself, publicly supported the creation of this Act before going on to create his iconic public television show.¹⁰³ American households nationwide were being offered access to high quality, educational and culturally enriching programming on public channels. Most of the content created at this time was made with adults in mind, often taking the form of host-forward television shows or documentary-style programming.¹⁰⁴

One of the most impactful networks that benefitted from the Public Broadcasting Act was the National Educational Television network, or NET. Initially a charity project on the behalf of the Ford Foundation, the NET was formed in 1951 for the very same reasons the Public Broadcasting Act was signed into law– to broadcast and create quality educational television.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Fred Rogers, "Senate Statement on PBS Funding," May 1, 1969, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/Fred%20Rogers%20-%20Testimony%20to%20Congress%20on%20PBS%20Funding.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ Turov, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell* pp. 8

¹⁰⁵ Archival Resources in Wisconsin. "National Educational Television Records, 1951-1969" Accessed February 16th, 2026.

<https://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=wiarchives;cc=wiarchives;view=text;rgn=main;didno=uw-whs-us0066af>

The Public Broadcasting Act's allocation of funds allowed networks like NET to feature once-local gems, like Pittsburgh's *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, on a national level.¹⁰⁶ NET would broadcast up to ten hours a week of unique programming in arts, culture, social sciences, children's shows, and public affairs, the bulk of their programming in children's shows and public affairs.¹⁰⁷ NET was the private predecessor to the current king of public television, the Public Broadcasting Service, being formally dissolved into PBS in 1971.¹⁰⁸ PBS officially began operations on November 3rd, 1969, and officially became a broadcaster on October 5, 1970; For a brief moment the two networks were essentially one in the same, PBS broadcasting NET programs and carrying on their legacy following its consolidation. The PBS television network was just one of the creations born of the Public Broadcasting Act, the National Public Radio, or NPR, founded in tandem with its television counterpart.¹⁰⁹ The founding of these nationally funded public broadcasting channels paved the path to *Sesame Street* and other hugely influential children's programs that would forever change children's television.¹¹⁰

Much like NET, the purpose of PBS was, as outlined in their founding charter, "organized *exclusively* for charitable, educational, scientific and literary purposes... To establish, develop, own, manage and operate one or more interconnection systems, facilities or services, to be used for the distribution of broadcast programs to noncommercial broadcast stations and networks;"¹¹¹ The two networks differed most in the absolute non-commercial nature of PBS, the network was committed to broadcast television content that would enrich the lives of their viewers without commercial influence. While PBS would later come to produce its own programming, initially PBS was composed of NET's successes and various programs from other public television

¹⁰⁶ Archival Resources in Wisconsin. "National Educational Television Records, 1951-1969"

¹⁰⁷ Archival Resources in Wisconsin. "National Educational Television Records, 1951-1969"

¹⁰⁸ David C. Stewart, *The PBS Companion: A History of Public Television* (New York: TV Books, 1999). pp. 1- 27

¹⁰⁹ Archival Resources in Wisconsin. "National Educational Television Records, 1951-1969"

¹¹⁰ Corporation for Public Broadcasting, "Public Broadcasting Act of 1967,"

¹¹¹ David C. Stewart, *The PBS Companion: A History of Public Television*. pp. 1 - 27

networks to be broadcast nationwide. Of those programs that existed between NET and PBS were two remarkably impactful children's shows that paved the way for edutainment as a genre, the aforementioned *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street*.

Section 3: Cheer for Change

Section 3.1 - Hello, Edutainment Renaissance!

In 1968, prior to the birth of PBS, NET aired a particularly special children's television show headed by minister Fred Rogers. This program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, was created with the intent of acknowledging children as developing human beings, designed to offer child viewers entertainment that would positively inform their social-emotional learning.¹¹² Keeping to this newfound trend in television of representing the regular, *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* explored themes of community; teaching children how to form and maintain relationships and practice kindness in the setting of the titular Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Mister Rogers entertained and educated through song and encouraged curiosity, explaining aspects of his everyday life and the world around him without infantilizing his young audience. Mister Rogers' demeanor and approach to empowering children through social-emotional learning was so effective that parents even reported their children gaining self confidence explicitly because Mister Rogers was confident in them.¹¹³ Mister Rogers, armed with gentleness, fun characters, and hidden life lessons, became a runaway success for the network, earning the interest and trust of children nationwide.¹¹⁴ *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* offered networks and the general public a proof of concept for edutainment; a program created with deliberate intention and thorough research, designed to teach children as much as it entertained. Though, entertainment was still the program's priority. *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* was not education cloaked in the veil of entertainment, though its NET-borne companion, *Sesame Street*, was.

¹¹² Mark Collins, Margaret Mary Kimmel, and David Newell, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, 2nd Edition: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

¹¹³ Collins, Kimmel, Newell, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, pp. 57

¹¹⁴ Collins, Kimmel, Newell, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, pp. 57

Before we explore how *Sesame Street* would go on to change, if not establish, the genre of edutainment, it's crucial to understand the similarly-intentioned programming that came before. Qualifying what is and isn't edutainment, as defined within the context of this paper, comes down to assessing the degree of educational intent, impact, and stylistic approach of a program: were these programs entertainment with some educational value, or educational material designed to entertain? Many shows throughout the 1950s and 1960s sought to include educational or culturally beneficial elements in their programming to satiate unhappy parents and keep out of the government's watchful, regulatory eye, though the mere feature of such content doesn't qualify the programming as edutainment.¹¹⁵ For example, *Rocky, Bullwinkle, and Friends* often featured poetry, fairytale retellings, and historical figures through their *Mr. Peabody and Sherman* short segments.¹¹⁶ However, while objectively educational and culturally relevant content was featured within the program, the primary intent was entertainment, leading to satirized and misrepresented versions of otherwise educational content.¹¹⁷ When watching *Rocky, Bullwinkle, and Friends*, children watching were far more likely to focus on Bullwinkle's overly comedic delivery while reading a sonnet by Shakespeare than the content of that sonnet.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, *Rocky, Bullwinkle, and Friends* did not ask its audience to further engage with whatever educational content they presented, no explanations behind certain histories or questions to inspire deeper thinking on a subject. Audiences, namely children, must be able to walk away from a program having confidently learned something in order for a program to be considered edutainment.

For programs in which the main purpose was to educate, entertainment value beyond fascination in any given subject is required as qualifying factor, intent and approach once more

¹¹⁵ Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell*, pp. 20

¹¹⁶ Scott, whole, *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends*

¹¹⁷ Scott, whole, *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends*

¹¹⁸ Scott, whole, *Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends*

dictating what constitutes edutainment. One can argue that a documentary is edutainment because they may find it interesting and it is undeniably educational, though the documentary's purpose is not to entertain as much as it is to educate. For example, some could argue that Disney's *True-Life Adventures* series of theatrical releases between 1948 and 1960, nature documentaries surrounding specific habitats or animals with expert narration and soundtracks typical of Disney's other works, is edutainment.. Take Disney's *True Life Adventures: Jungle Cats*, where the narrator follows a jaguar and its interactions with family, prey, and other predators in the Amazon rainforest.¹¹⁹ The documentary, in its pursuit of education, cannot interfere with the life of the Jaguar to increase intrigue and entertainment value. This is not to discount the entertainment value added by the music and orchestral narration, though these two features alone cannot fuse the educational content of the documentary with intentional entertainment. Additionally, *Jungle Cats* and other like programs do not prompt audience engagement with the material, the programming functioning more as a well-produced lecture than as edutainment. To be considered proper edutainment, educational content and the entertainment aspect must be intertwined and actively engaging the audience, which is exactly what *Sesame Street* did.

¹¹⁹ James Algar, *Jungle Cat of the Amazon* (Walt Disney Productions, Released by Walt Disney Educational Media Co, 1974).

Section 3.2 - *Sesame Street*, a Case Study

In 1969, *Sesame Street* first debuted on NET with a unique cast of humans, puppets, and cartoons ready to teach and learn from one another. The program was created by the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), and experimental children's entertainment production studio that combined creativity with research to create impactful programs, like *The Electric Company* and *Sesame Street*.¹²⁰ This program, though immensely creative, was unremarkable on the surface level, as many children's programs featured animation, puppets, and educational content. *Sesame Street* operated as a children's variety show, baking basic early childhood education into quick scenes, full of color, movement, and interest. One of the things that set *Sesame Street* aside from other edutainment is that it functioned with an entertainment-first approach, much like many other popular children's shows of the era, as it embraced the comedy and flashiness that kept the interest of short attention spans. This differed from most other educational programs at the time, which were either slower paced or less interested in veiling their educational content with entertainment. The education was the entertainment, one factor not supplemental to the other. The focus of *Sesame Street*'s educational approach was to introduce children to essential pre-school concepts inside the home, such as hygiene, community, ABCs, numbers, and social-emotional learning. The wide variety of topics covered was complimented by the structure of the show. *Sesame Street*'s structure surrounded a central plot and characters, the central plot broken up by a number of equally random and relevant cartoons, skits, and songs surrounding themes of the episode.

¹²⁰ Richard M. Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street: Origins of the Children's Television Workshop*. pp. 2

A theme from *Sesame Street*'s first episode, "Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," is personal hygiene and cleanliness, designed to empower young viewers to independently engage in personal hygiene while understanding general concepts of cleanliness.¹²¹ The topic is first introduced as the audience, and Sally, are introduced to puppet roommates Bert and Ernie as Ernie is taking a bath.¹²² The initial scene with Bert and Ernie is short, interrupted by an animated and bath-time themed rendition of the Solomon Grundy nursery rhyme.¹²³ In the animated short with Solomon Grundy, children are introduced to days of the week, parts of the body including lefts and rights, and once again concepts of cleanliness as the animated Solomon Grundy washes a different part of his body in the bath each day of the week.¹²⁴ The animated Solomon Grundy short is followed by a young boy narrating how he understands cleanliness, and takes showers to stay clean.¹²⁵ The boy goes on to discuss cleanliness through brushing his teeth, how animals bathe, the concept of car washes, and household chores.¹²⁶ Immediately after, the show cuts back to Ernie fresh out of his bath. Ernie discusses how good he feels now that he's clean, met by a dead-panned and grumbling Bert, Ernie then proceeds to encourage viewers to pretend to wash themselves with him.¹²⁷ As Ernie guides viewers to pretend to wash different parts of their bodies, the show cuts to shots to the rest of the cast following suit with Ernie's instructions, having fun as they pretend to wash their ears and hands.¹²⁸ Throughout the Ernie's instruction, the word 'wash' reappears on screen every time he speaks it, the letter 'w' highlighted from the rest of the word as to make it stand out.¹²⁹ We then learn the letter 'w' is the

¹²¹"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street* (PBS, 1969).

¹²²"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²³"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²⁴"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²⁵"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²⁶"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²⁷"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²⁸"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹²⁹"Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

sponsored letter of the episode, meaning that many skits, shorts, and songs will focus on the letter and words that utilize it.¹³⁰ Though this section of the episode is short, it well illustrates how *Sesame Street*'s formula for edutainment surpassed its predecessors. Within a five minute span, children are not only introduced to a topic, but educated on the topic and shown how it relates to other aspects of their lives and education. Additionally, within five minutes, three individual scenes of different mediums were shown, designed to maintain interest while educating. Children can walk away from this segment on cleanliness alone with a better understanding of what it means to be clean, how to clean yourself, how other things are clean, and that 'wash' is a 'w' word. The episode then goes on to discuss: counting, milk, leadership, the letter 's', families, the long 'e' sound, and directions, with a particular focus on the number '2' and letter 'w' as they are the sponsored (featured) characters of the episode.

On the surface level, this structure, and the content of the program, may seem very random and disorganized, though it is entirely intentional. Outside of the way in which education is woven into the entertaining aspects of the show, nothing *Sesame Street* was doing was necessarily new. *Sesame Street* was a fully simulated version of the complete television watching experience, commercials and all, just on a non-commercial channel.¹³¹ Elements were borrowed from a variety of children's television genres, tropes, and commercial advertising styles, the programs featuring the aesthetics, persuasive techniques, exploitation of attention spans, and occasionally content style, that mainstream media did.¹³² Prior to the show's debut, *Sesame Street* advertised itself using an educational parody of popular program *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* called *The Man from Alphabet* to draw in viewership, copying the general plot and humor but translated for a younger audience of learners with puppets and letters.¹³³ Mainstream television,

¹³⁰ "Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street," episode, *Sesame Street*

¹³¹ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 45

¹³² Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 45

¹³³ Children's Television Workshop, "Sesame Street Starts November 10th," *World's Finest*, November 1969.

whether through programs, movies, or advertisements, sought to exploit attention spans and maintain attention for profit, encouraging viewers to keep watching, or buy whatever it was they were selling. *Sesame Street* did indeed mirror mainstream television in this way, though for some reasons that differed from commercial networks. It is undeniable that *Sesame Street* mirrored the attention-keeping nature of mainstream television to maintain viewership, as viewership would keep the experimental program on air, however these very same techniques were used to ensure whatever lessons being taught in episodes were being paid attention to. One of the most fascinating aspects of *Sesame Street* was the degree of intentionality put behind every detail in the program: episodes made in tandem with child psychologists, media experts, and educators to make the most engaging program possible.¹³⁴ Rather than compete with the loudness of mainstream commercial television, *Sesame Street* co-opted what made mainstream television so watchable in order to ensure success in educating their audiences. Additionally, the exclusive place to watch *Sesame Street* after 1970 was on PBS, a completely non-commercial network that featured no advertisements or sponsor driven influence.¹³⁵ A key issue with the exploitative nature of mainstream television was the commercial aspect, both in programming and in advertisements. Through PBS's lack of commercial influence, that key issue is eliminated.

¹³⁴ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 45

¹³⁵ David C. Stewart, *The PBS Companion: A History of Public Television* pp. 1 - 27



Figure 4. Advertisement for Sesame Street featuring Batman and Superman, *World's Finest*, 1969

However, content style alone wasn't the only way that *Sesame Street* was able to keep engagement. *Sesame Street* employed an unprecedented technique in drawing in viewership, opting to feature two controversial figures of children's media to advertise and feature on the program: Batman and Superman. The two crimefighters served as remarkably contested figures between the 1950s and 1960s, their comic books and television shows, in the live-action form and cartoon form, were all investigated for influencing children towards violence and delinquency. Though, the creators of *Sesame Street*, CTW, knew that regardless of controversy Batman and Superman were essential figures to childhood and would be key to generating higher viewership for the show. Prior to *Sesame Street*'s release in 1969, the CTW released an advertisement in *World's Finest*, a comic from DC comics that featured a variety of superheroes, most primarily Batman and Superman. Halfway through the comic, readers are greeted with an image of Batman and Superman in front of a television, pointing at themselves on the screen of the television holding a poster that read 'National Educational Television', the first network to air *Sesame Street*.¹³⁶ Batman informs readers that tuning into *Sesame Street* can help get the

¹³⁶ Children's Television Workshop, "Sesame Street Starts November 10th,"

illiterate youngsters in their lives the right start in learning to read, while Superman discusses how viewers can “Learn letters from the Man from Alphabet... Take exciting trips... Enjoy funny cartoons... Learn to count... Plus lots of other interesting things. Batman and I will be there with many other famous stars. Watch us on Sesame Street!”¹³⁷ Beneath the image, the advertisement informs readers when and where they can watch *Sesame Street*.

This advertisement is striking not only because of who is advertising *Sesame Street*, Batman and Superman, but because of who the advertisement was targeted at. The advertisement is featured in a comic book, which not only requires an audience that is able to read provided the nature of the medium, but is also very popular with older children, preteens, and teens. This advertisement addressed readers (children), employed well known and beloved characters, and instilled a sense of civil responsibility in those reading. As to advertising through the television or to parents, CTW opted to target older literate children as conduits for the education of younger children, prompting them not only to propose *Sesame Street* as a program to watch to younger viewers, but also piquing the interest of older children by featuring the very characters of the comic they’re reading. Superman and Batman claiming to make appearances in *Sesame Street*, in wake of scrutiny for both their programs and comics being excessively violent, also enables younger children to engage with content reserved for older children without witnessing things inappropriate outside their age group. This advertisement defines a distinction between ages groups for age appropriate content, prompts young readers to encourage young-nonreaders to learn, and prompts excitement between intended audience age groups for something new and wonderful. Superman and Batman inviting children to watch *Sesame Street* also further exemplifies the intent behind the creation of *Sesame Street* as an edutainment program,

¹³⁷ Children’s Television Workshop, “Sesame Street Starts November 10th,”

employing well known and loved characters to entertain as they taught in a program where the focus was not action or suspense, but education.

More so, Batman and Superman were indeed actual guest stars on *Sesame Street*, complete with heroic acts and their scheming villains to boot. Superman would first appear in in official *Sesame Street* episodes on January 21st, 1971 in an animated short in which he describes why the letter ‘S’ is his very favorite letter.¹³⁸ The short features Superman explaining that though ‘Superman’ starts with an ‘S’, many other words do as well.¹³⁹ Superman then lists the words ‘speed’, ‘sky’, ‘spaceship’, ‘sea’, ‘sailboat’, ‘storm’, ‘sinking’, ‘save’, and ‘sand’ as he flies through the air, fights a spaceship, and rescues a man from a sinking boat.¹⁴⁰ Superman then reminds viewers to think of the letter ‘S’ when they think of him, as it is his very favorite letter.¹⁴¹ In a similar vein, Batman made three appearances within the first few years of *Sesame Street*, two airing as ‘Sesame-Shorts’ and one airing in *Sesame Street* episode 99.¹⁴² The shorts are about safely crossing the road, the difference between dirty and clean, and up, around, and through directions.¹⁴³ Each of the shorts, for Batman and Superman, are animated in the same style of *The New Adventures of Superman* and *The Superman/Aquaman Hour of Adventure*. This detail is very important, as it accomplishes a very similar goal to that of the Batman and Superman advertisement of 1969. In featuring Batman and Superman in *Sesame Street*, it yet again encourages older viewers to watch *Sesame Street* in order to see characters they love, increasing the likelihood that an older Superman fan will suggest watching *Sesame Street* with a younger friend or sibling. Additionally, the feature of Batman and Superman in their official

¹³⁸ Sesame Street Classics, ed., “Sesame Street: Superman’s Favorite Letter ‘S,’” YouTube, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFd-nQ2GBzc>.

¹³⁹ Sesame Street Classics, ed., “Sesame Street: Superman’s Favorite Letter ‘S,’”

¹⁴⁰ Sesame Street Classics, ed., “Sesame Street: Superman’s Favorite Letter ‘S,’”

¹⁴¹ Sesame Street Classics, ed., “Sesame Street: Superman’s Favorite Letter ‘S,’”

¹⁴² Dave Connell, “Relational Concepts (Continued)” (New York: New York City, 1970).

¹⁴³ Connell, “Relational Concepts (Continued)”

cartoon forms allows children to feel included in watching the adventures of superheroes that older siblings or peers may be allowed to watch, but they are not. When considering this, recall the backlash that Superman cartoons and comics received in the 1950s and 60s. CTW was clearly conscious of the popularity and controversy of the two characters in the children's realm, as well as Spiderman who was a frequent guest of *The Electric Company*. CTW opted to use that balance of popularity and controversy to attract viewership and offer an educational alternative version of these characters suitable for younger viewers, learners, and concerned adults.

Section 3.3 - Other Edutainment

Though *Sesame Street* was a shining example of what made the edutainment renaissance different, as most scholars regard it as the single most revolutionary program that gave way to this new era in children's entertainment, *Sesame Street* was not the only revolutionary program of the era.¹⁴⁴ The PBS programs *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street* were merely the beginning of the edutainment renaissance, the two programs making way for a number of deliberately intentional, educational, and entertaining children's programs to follow in their footsteps. Programs of note are *The Electric Company*, *Schoolhouse Rock!*, and *ZOOM!* Programs like *The Electric Company* produced by the same people behind *Sesame Street*, followed suit in utilizing the *Sesame Street* formula, just for a slightly older audience of older elementary school students between 2nd and 4th grade.¹⁴⁵ *The Electric Company* focused on reading, phonics, and literary devices like metaphors and alliteration. *The Electric Company* also featured more adults and abstract humor than what was in *Sesame Street*, additionally opting to exclude puppet while including animation. Different approaches that built off this balanced hybrid of education and entertainment came from programs like *ZOOM!* and *Schoolhouse Rock!* Each program took aspects from *Sesame Street* and furthered it, *ZOOM!* Opting to represent unscripted children as focal characters just as *Sesame Street* did, while *Schoolhouse Rock!* created animated shorts similar in concept to those played throughout *Sesame Street*. *ZOOM!* was a child-focused variety show, led by an entirely unscripted cast of kids who taught and learned what other childviewers wanted to see. For example, if a child wanted to learn how to do the cha-cha, as one did in season one of *ZOOM!*, they could write in a request to the *ZOOM!*

¹⁴⁴ Downing, *What TV Taught*, pp.iv

¹⁴⁵ Joan Ganz Cooney, *The Electric Company; Television and Reading, 1971-1980: A Mid Experiment Appraisal* (New York City, New York: Children's Television Workshop, 1976).

team for the children on the show to learn and teach the dance.¹⁴⁶ By contrast, *Schoolhouse Rock!* completely removed actual people from its approach to edutainment, and focused on promoting direct academic topics. *Schoolhouse Rock!* sought to educate via musical animated shorts about a variety of school topics, including math, science, history, and english.

Regardless of what form or approach these programs took, their intent remained the same. *Sesame Street*, *Schoolhouse Rock!*, and *The Electric Company* all had the primary intent of keeping young minds engaged with the programming they were watching beyond their inherent entertainment value. Television had become interactive, and invited its viewers to be a part of the show. The content of these shows, which prompted engagement, had become tools of education and learning in a way that wasn't once possible. The television across decades has been often referred to as a babysitter, something merely to keep the child anchored and entertained, however, the television had now become a tool of education and thus, a teacher. The degree of engagement prompted by colorful characters and kind souls invited offered something in homes across America that many parents couldn't in light of long work days— attention. This attention offered by America's new silly sweethearts wasn't just warm and loving, it was educational, and this was intentionally beneficial to young minds, not designed to exploit them.

In response to America's outcries for better children's media and aided by the funds provided by the Public Broadcasting Act, the radical individuals who chose to care about the well being of children via the television had the opportunity to put thought into what would raise kids across the United States. For Fred Rogers, his intention was direct, famously stating in a 1999 CNN interview, "I went into television because I hated it so, and I thought there was some way of using this fabulous instrument to be of nurture to those who would watch and listen."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ "ZOOM! Pilot," episode, *ZOOM!* (PBS, 1972).

¹⁴⁷ "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood; Queen of Jazz; Bishop Unbound," broadcast, *NewsStand: CNN & Time* (CNN, December 31, 2000).

Rogers believed that as someone who worked in television, it was your duty to serve your nation through the television, especially when it came to children.¹⁴⁸ Rodgers was most troubled by the violence and shameless marketing children were exposed to via the television, especially in their own programs.¹⁴⁹ Rogers also understood the value of calm and quiet, a virtue most children's programming before his lacked greatly.¹⁵⁰ Even among other new edutainment programs, such as *Sesame Street* or *Schoolhouse Rock!*, *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* remained the undisputed champion of low-stimulation and focus-forward children's programming. Rogers went beyond his own judgement for what best made a program for children, deliberately consulting with former mentor and child psychologist Dr. Margaret McFarland during the production of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* on theories of child development to ensure his television show was not only what he wanted to see for children, but what children themselves needed.¹⁵¹ This collaboration was evident in the formatting of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, the show designed with moments of quiet and contemplation, featuring a focus on a singular particular topic or item as central to the questions, plot, and make-believe aspects of any given episode. Though most importantly, the most intentional aspect of the program was to make sure children felt safe, welcome, and loved as they watched *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*. Rogers offered himself as a friend and confidant via the television, with famous words such as "I like you as you are", successfully completing the safe space for young viewers he had created.¹⁵²

While Fred Rogers sought to emotionally regulate and educate children on topics like community, feelings, and kindness, groups like the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) opted to focus on foundational scholarly topics, such as reading and counting, while addressing

¹⁴⁸ "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood; Queen of Jazz; Bishop Unbound,"

¹⁴⁹ "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood; Queen of Jazz; Bishop Unbound,"

¹⁵⁰ "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood; Queen of Jazz; Bishop Unbound,"

¹⁵¹ "Margaret McFarland," *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.misterrogers.org/articles/margaret-mcfarland/>.

¹⁵² "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood; Queen of Jazz; Bishop Unbound,"

social emotional learning and things children may encounter in their day to day lives. CTW was responsible for two majorly important programs in the edutainment renaissance, *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*. In 1966 the Children's Television Workshop was unofficially founded by visionaries Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett, and similarly to Fred Rogers, they dared to question how television could better serve the children watching.¹⁵³ Particularly inspired by the recent Civil Rights movement and the War on Poverty, the CTW set out with a goal to even the educational playing field through educational television that would benefit society's more disadvantaged and unrepresented children.¹⁵⁴ The CTW was determined to achieve their goals the right way, the team behind their first project, *Sesame Street*, armed with experts and researchers in entertainment, child development, and education.¹⁵⁵ The CTW's objectives in creating this completely new approach to children's programming were to improve children's cognitive ability, introduce supplementary educational content, and to inspire further engagement with the content of the show all through the television.¹⁵⁶ Posed with the task of ensuring that children were entertained, CTW took inspiration from the fast pace and constant distraction typical of commercial television and advertisements children would already be watching.¹⁵⁷ Thus, *Sesame Street* in all its unique glory was born.

Sesame Street's creation was the most direct response to the issues of children's television in the 1960s, those issues being excessive violence and racism on the screen. This response is evident in all episodes of *Sesame Street* during this era, the show making conscious efforts to introduce diverse cast members in a positive light while simultaneously upholding the chaos and humor that made children's shows popular without any fights, struggles, or crimes being

¹⁵³ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*. pp. 1-9

¹⁵⁴ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 39-51

¹⁵⁵ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 25-36

¹⁵⁶ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 25-36

¹⁵⁷ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*, pp. 45

committed on screen. Particularly, *Sesame Street*'s approach to anti-racism made it stand out from children's programs of yesteryear. Outside of the colorful puppet cast, *Sesame Street*'s main characters, Gordon and Susan, were deliberately Black. Focal human characters being Black in *Sesame Street* was a deliberate casting choice also served to disrupt biases and prejudice among viewers. By portraying a Black couple, and particularly Gordon who is a Black man, as intelligent, present, and loving community members disrupts racist stereotypes against Black people in the wake of the civil rights movement— particularly stereotypes regarding absent fathers and criminality. CTW wanted to combat stereotypes upheld in media regarding Black folks to not only to create an air of acceptance and empowerment among viewers, but also to combat how other contemporary programs portrayed minorities.¹⁵⁸ This strategy was also used in *The Electric Company*, which featured a expansively diverse core cast and celebrity guests.

The casting of Gordon and Susan as gentle, kind Black community members was also meant to reflect the environment inner city children lived in, *Sesame Street* making very intentional efforts to provide representation in environment as well.¹⁵⁹ The show was intentionally designed to resonate with poor, Black inner city children the most. The set for *Sesame Street* was based off the famously Black New York City neighborhood of Harlem. Show creator Joan Ganz Cooney citing *Sesame Street*'s target viewer as "...a 4-year-old, inner-city, Black youngster."¹⁶⁰ CTW had intentionally designed their programming to represent the underrepresented while simultaneously appealing to all genders and races, the ultimate goal being that they leave their viewing experience both educated and empowered. CTW's focus on *Sesame Street*'s target audience being young, poor, and Black was an attempt to ease the ills of systemic racism that kept these families poor, acknowledging that the less privileged did indeed

¹⁵⁸ Roscoe Orman, *Sesame Street Dad: Evolution of an Actor*. 2005.

¹⁵⁹ Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street*. pp. 1-9

¹⁶⁰ Fred M. Hechinger, "About Education: 'Sesame Street' After 10 Years," *New York Times*, November 6, 1979.

watch more television than their wealthier counterparts and were disproportionately Black. By changing what was available on the television to these children from mindless slapstick to edutainment, with a heavy focus on literacy in *The Electric Company*, CTW was offering disadvantaged children a better shot at success in all arenas.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

Children's television in the modern day is not so far a cry from children's television of yesteryear, a complicated blend of cheap attention grabbing content, entertainment for entertainment's sake, and sincere edutainment deigned to benefit youngsters everywhere. Though, the programs Americans were raised on would not have been possible without the radical change made during the edutainment renaissance, and the protest over children's programming that came before that.

Television has always been a tool of education, and a powerful one at that. Its potential went virtually unrecognized in the earlier years of television history, the industry failing to realize that a wholesome bridge between education and entertainment was possible without compromising the integrity of one aspect over the other. Edutainment programs prior to the late 1960s failed to captivate audiences and evoke change in the same way they did during the edutainment renaissance. Network investment went overwhelmingly into programs designed to maintain audience attention and profit sponsors, networks, and investors. However, private and government investment in education and culture to be shared across American television screens proved to be a massive success— both in maintaining viewership and effectively educating those watching. Programs like *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* are responsible for teaching multiple generations of children, studies have proven that the formula edutainment programs of the edutainment renaissance created were entirely effective, shows like *Sesame Street* proven to work as an educational substitute to attending pre-school.¹⁶¹ The edutainment renaissance forever

¹⁶¹ Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine, working paper, *Early Childhood Education by MOCC: Lessons from Sesame Street* (Washington D.C.: National Bureau of Economics, 2015).

changed the course of children's television history, though it owes its success to the programs that came before it.

The development of the edutainment renaissance would not have been possible if not for the very programs that garnered persistent protest against excessive violence and racial misrepresentation. The NAACP was vital in combatting prominent racial stereotyping in programming presented to children. The NAACP remained a challenger to racial stereotyping present in children's media despite years of being ignored by networks, only to finally succeed in the ultimate goal removing egregious caricatures from syndication as the Civil Rights movements further discouraged such content. This rejection would also encourage positive diverse racial representation during the edutainment renaissance, the role of characters like *Sesame Street's* Gordon combatting the harm done in perpetuating stereotypes by characters like *Coal Black and De Sebben Dwarves'* Prince Charming.

NAFBRAT was an essential player in changing the landscape of children's television in the 1950s and 60s. NAFBRAT was loud and effective in making their opinions on children's television known, so much so that it landed them national headlines, roles in senate hearings, and a bad reputation among network executives.¹⁶² NAFBRAT played equal roles in keeping programs they approved of as they did advocating for the removal of others from television through reports, research, and various campaigns. Though never cited directly as a cause for change to television schedules, with the exception of keeping *Captain Kangaroo* on air, NAFBRAT and the impact of the groups reviews are almost always mentioned alongside notices of program cancellation.¹⁶³ NAFBRAT created an expectation for whatever new children's

¹⁶² Laurent, "NAFBRAT Report."

¹⁶³ Gent, "N.B.C and C.B.S Announce Change in Children's TV."

programming was to come in the late 1960s, and that expectation was fulfilled by the programs of the edutainment renaissance.

The edutainment renaissance cannot solely attribute the success of its programming to the development and degree in which anti-violence and anti-racist rhetorics drove change in children's media. Of course, a large factor in the success and impact of edutainment programs from this era stem from a completely unique integration of education and entertainment. Though the success of programs in the edutainment renaissance must also be attributed to the aesthetics, themes, and characters of previous programs in which programs of edutainment renaissance borrowed and mastered for a broader audience in cooperation with a rejection of violence and racism. The television shows of edutainment renaissance understood how important the 'entertainment' aspect of edutainment was, and instead of trying to create a new approach to entertaining audiences, these programs opted to utilize what was already worked in keeping viewers entertained. This resulted in variety-show style amalgamations of song, puppetry, popular characters, celebrities, and moments inspired by the flashy intrigue of commercial advertisements. Edutainment would not look the same had it not learned from the weaknesses and borrowed from the strengths of what other children's programming had to offer.

Edutainment programs of the 2020s, whether those be through television, video streaming, or otherwise, must reflect on the successes of the edutainment renaissance, and understand the importance of its development. The edutainment renaissance was so impactful because of its response and approach to creating beneficial television. Creators in the late 1960s and early 1970s understood the public concern over what children were consuming and developed a response that would simultaneously acknowledge and dispel the issues it presented. In approach, creators knew that what they were creating had to compete with mainstream entertainment for children, and as to creating something new these creators borrowed, imitated,

and mastered the very aspects of entertainment that kept child audiences interested and engaged. In a world where education and public television are being defunded, and edutainment is being weaponized as a tool of conservative propaganda that undermines the very origins of how modern edutainment came to be, now is a more important time than ever to bring about a new period of change in children's entertainment.

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