F is for Feminism: Understanding 1970s Social Conflict through *Sesame Street*

by

Taylor Mason

December 16, 2024

Submitted for HIST408

In the most honest declaration a child can muster up, Merrie Uhlman proclaimed her admiration to her one true love, Ernie, one week before Valentine's Day 1979. A girl of few words, she simply wrote, "Dear Ernie, I love you. Will you be my Valentine? I am 5 years old. Love, Merrie Uhlman," and accompanied her vulnerable note with drawings of bright flowers and several hearts, and a black and white photo of herself for Ernie.[1] Along with her Valentine's card, Merrie's mother, Grace Uhlman, sent a letter of her own from their home in Providence, Rhode Island to the executives at the Children's Television Workshop.[2] In her letter, Mrs. Uhlman applauded *Sesame Street* for its inclusion of people with disabilities and its excellent educational content. Mrs. Uhlman praised "the muppets, in particular, [who] seem very effective in holding her [daughter's] attention and she copies everything they say and do" and affirmed "we are both in love with the program." Mrs. Uhlman's only request of the CTW was for a TV guide so she and her daughter would know when to tune in to their beloved show. These modest letters—a few pieces of paper, some crayons and pens, and a financial sacrifice of one postage stamp—reveal more than simply fan appreciation. Letters like those sent in by Merrie and Mrs. Uhlman opened a window into American families and culture in the 1970s.

When examined as a collection, the thousands of letters in the CTW archives revealed the deepening chasms in American society. While love was in the air for some, other children and grownups expressed strong opposition against elements of the show. Young viewer Paul Jenne called out Cookie Monster directly in his letter for poor eating habits as he argued, "do you know

---

[1] Merrie and Mrs. G. Uhlman to Ernie, letters, Providence, RI, February 7, 1979, box 47, folder 2, Children's Television Workshop Archives, Hornbake Library Special Collections, University of Maryland, College Park. Hereafter, CTW Archives.

[2] This paper will refer to the Children's Television Workshop as the CTW. The CTW included many production staff, educators, and psychologists with a common objective of creating meaningful television programming. Some of the CTW's most successful shows included *Sesame Street, The Electric Company, Feeling Good, The Best of Families,* and *3-2-1 Contact*. While it is not the focus of this paper to explore the workshop's struggles and achievements, their work is why people sent in letters and is therefore, a valuable consideration in this paper. The CTW changed its name to Sesame Workshop in 2000.

what your [sic] doing? You makeing [sic] children like me are got bad teeth and boddy [sic].”[3] Ignoring the grammatical and spelling mistakes, Paul’s claims from the kids’ table were often echoed by adult letter writers, many of whom complained about Cookie’s not so fabulous record on nutrition. One woman from Washington went as far as advocating for “an ‘Apple Monster’ or a ‘Carrot Freak’!”[4] Although children for the most part stuck with their fan art and requests to guest star on *Sesame Street*, adults held diverse opinions on whether the show was a success, and made sure to let the CTW hear their words. Both letters of praise and criticism of *Sesame Street* left no stone unturned as all facets of the show were up for debate. Grownups celebrated *Sesame Street’s* educational practices, inclusion of different races, genders, and abilities, and prosocial behaviors. At the same time, other adults argued *Sesame Street* promoted the exact opposite of these ideals. Because *Sesame Street’s* fan mail was so varied in its judgments, a CTW secretary could find in the same stack one letter citing the show’s promotion of sexist stereotypes, another saying Count von Count ruined math because of his scary demeanor, another raving about the inclusion of urban life on screen, another citing the show’s disregard of the traditional family, and another questionable sketch of Big Bird’s physique.

Preserved in the University of Maryland’s Special Collections Archives, the CTW records contain thousands of letters just like Mrs. Uhlman’s and Paul’s along with countless company documents dated from 1960 to 1995. Covering the inception of the CTW to the turn of the twenty-first century, the collection provides inside information on some of the workshop’s most successful television shows, including *Sesame Street.* While the corporate records and reports, press clippings, research data, and other files serve important research purposes, the most valuable part of the collection in understanding the milieu of the 1970s were letters from

[3] Paul Jenne to Cookey Monster, letter, box 45, folder 42, CTW Archives.
[4] Mrs. Willi Schmidt to *Sesame Street,* letter, Enumclaw, WA, box 45, folder 16, CTW Archives.

Sesame Street viewers, fans, and critics in the first decade of production.[5] Examining the letters offers an unique–and invaluable–lens into the social and cultural debates roiling American society in the post-civil rights era. The correspondence between viewers and CTW leadership offers a direct means of listening in on contemporary controversies.

While the letters drew from a great geographical diversity across the United States, the overwhelming majority of the adult letters were written by women. Women expressed their views on *Sesame Street*'s characters, content and production decisions, behind-the-scenes staff, rumors on potential episodes[6], and the values promoted through the television screen. The volume—and breadth of content—in the letters revealed a wide array of opinions rather than a single generic "female gaze." At the same time, a notable detail across the *Sesame Street* letters was the frequency by which female authors identified themselves as mothers. Whether explicitly stated through something along the lines of "I am a mother" or something more indirect (such as including details about their children), the inclusion of such an identifying detail is worth noting.[7] Throughout history, women wielded their identities as mothers to justify their credibility to speak on diverse issues. For instance, when writing about post-World War II women's activism and protest, historian Joanne Meyerowitz noted, "women volunteers routinely used their status as mothers to enhance their political clout, while women professionals used their credentials and expertise to the same end."[8] The letters to *Sesame Street* corroborated the

[5] With its extensive and ongoing history, it is a challenge to tackle all of the *Sesame Street* letters. The collection documented the first decade (1969-1979) in great detail, providing an excellent date range for this paper.
[6] One rumor was a *Sesame Street* episode would be talking about birth control and abortion, which resulted in hundreds of letters against the idea. The CTW publicly addressed the false rumors and cited a misunderstanding about a potential adult series on general health and wellness. Despite CTW addressing the rumor through a public press release, more letters came in afterwards outraged about the idea of abortion on television.
[7] Other common phrases indicated motherhood, such as "my x-year-old child" or "as a mother of…".
[8] Joanne Meyerowitz, "Rewriting Postwar Women's History, 1945-1960," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Blackwell, 2002), 386.

assertion that women leaned into motherhood or other parts of their identity to assert influence and claim expertise.

The conversations that women had within the *Sesame Street* letters were not one-sided for two reasons. First, the letters to CTW executives did not go straight to Oscar the Grouch's humble abode. Many of the letters preserved in the collection were stamped by the CTW as "received" or appropriately dated on arrival. A smaller number of letters were marked with "responded" and a considerable number of letters had a copy of *Sesame Street*'s reply, with several responses coming from important stakeholders like co-founder Joan Ganz Cooney. At the bare minimum, the CTW took time and labor to process letters from viewers, showing the studio was aware of the public's reception of the show. At its best, this evidence suggests *Sesame Street* reflected on the praise and criticism it received in order to modify the show. Second, the *Sesame Street* letters that discussed topics the writers saw as part of the show also illustrated the broader social conversations during the early 1970s. Any conversation one could have in a letter about *Sesame Street* could have applied to conversations on any street corner or living room in the United States. Letter writers discussed racial diversity and inequality, gender roles, disability inclusion, nutrition, and communism as well as many other topics.[9] Reaching beyond the television screen, conversations about a children's educational program represented the diverse social conflicts and movements of the 1970s.

This paper will examine how self-identified mothers and women spoke through ink in letters to *Sesame Street* on the issues related to nutrition and breastfeeding as well as to gender roles and feminism. Despite being addressed to the CTW, the arguments within these letters

[9] While it is nearly impossible to categorize all of the *Sesame Street* letters, the intersections of race, gender, and nutrition appeared most frequently and will be explored in this paper. On disability inclusion, several letters praised the inclusion of characters who are deaf and communicate with American Sign Language. On communism, multiple letters raised concern over *Sesame Street*'s leading musician, Pete Seeger, who had connections to the Communist Party.

transcend their envelopes and are a window into 1970s societal debates. The combination of asserting an identity and voicing an opinion in the same letter serves as meaningful examples for how Americans engage in civil discourse to change the world around them. Viewed through this lens, *Sesame Street* was more than a show with joyful characters, catchy music, and a vampire teaching numbers: it was a two-way mirror into the consciousness of American culture. The people conversed with *Sesame Street* on 1970s social topics through mail and newspaper articles. *Sesame Street* conversed with the people on 1970s social topics through its responses to mail, reports, and reconsideration of programming decisions. Analyzed together, these conversations do not emerge with a consistent, victorious idea nor a single lens through which motherhood and nutrition could be understood. Instead, the results were as murky as the unresolved issues related to feminism and health in the 1970s.

Scholars have studied various forms of television as a reflection of conversations from broader 1970s society but few have considered children's programming. Historian Bruce Schulman argued the 1975 situation comedy, *The Jeffersons,* was a representation of the transition from integration to diversity in American discourse. The show, he found, "marked the crest of the civil rights movement, the summit of its material achievements, and the beginning of the end of the integrationist ideal."[10] When projected onto society, the show represented conversations happening in the Supreme Court and in the pages of *The New York Times* about whether meaningful diversity could be achieved.[11] Communication scholar Bonnie Dow's *Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News* analyzed news coverage on feminist activism from major news outlets. Although she described the events of her case studies, Dow argued "the multiplicity of news coverage and its consequences

[10] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (Free Press, 2001), 54.
[11] Schulman, *The Seventies,* 60, 70.

reflected feminism's own variety and attendant instability in 1970, when it lacked the clearly defined goals, such as 'stop the war' or 'end Jim Crow;' attached to other contemporaneous countercultural efforts."[12] Dow evaluated the strategies media outlets utilized in their media coverage as conversations themselves about the second wave, not just what their camera crews recorded. Taken together, Schulman and Dow considered television programing as a commentary window into the 1970s.[13]

Yet, these historical narratives only spoke to what conversations came across the screen, not necessarily how ordinary people engaged with those conversations at the time. Examining the letters to *Sesame Street* rather than simply the content of the program itself offers a more robust understanding of 1970s social conflicts and movements. Furthermore, there is a gap in television scholarship in that few scholars have considered investigating children's television as a medium of conversation on broader social issues. It is easy to apply an ABC news anchor's comment that "women's liberation would mean that women would cease wearing miniskirts, a garment that is the biggest advance in urban beautification since Central Park" to a broader cultural discussion if women are just eye candy for mediocre men.[14] But how does fan mail from a children's show, let alone the show itself, where fluffy felt creatures talk for an hour, say anything about 1970s societal battles?

Much of the scholarly research on *Sesame Street* has focused on how the show pioneered methods for children's educational television and uplifted the importance of preschool education and early learning but rarely discussed its role as a mirror to American cultural debates. Developmental psychologist Shalom M. Fisch, for example, argued how a wide variety of

---

[12] Bonnie J. Dow, *Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News* (University of Illinois Press, 2014), 3.
[13] For further reading on the historical implications of television; Gary Edgerton and Peter Rollins, eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (University Press of Kentucky, 2001).
[14] Dow, *Watching Women's Liberation*, 151.

television shows promote school readiness skills but cited *Sesame Street* as the original and having the greatest impact. He explained *Sesame Street*'s unique research model was "an interdisciplinary approach to television production that brought together content experts, television producers, and educational researchers, who collaborated throughout the life of the project" to be later referred to in the industry as the CTW Model or Sesame Workshop Model.[15] In a collection of essays that he edited with Senior Vice President of Curriculum and Content Rosemarie T. Truglio, Fisch and Truglio reexamined thirty years of *Sesame Street* research. Topics ranged from *Sesame Street*'s curriculum and the CTW Model to a recontact study of former viewers.[16] Fisch and Truglio's work exemplified why *Sesame Street* is regarded as an equally fascinating and enriching phenomenon for preschool children and grownups alike.

Historians and other scholars have taken a different approach to *Sesame Street*'s legacy. Journalist Michael Davis summarized the history of the entire show at a detail level comparable to an oral history in his book, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street.*[17] Historian Evan Richardson examined the exportation of the CTW co-production model to other countries' international adaptations of *Sesame Street.* Instead of imposing American values and norms onto the children of the world as an act of cultural imperialism, Richardson argued the model led to independent programs with individualized goals under the *Sesame Street* family.[18] Historian Robert Morrow prefaced the origins of the CTW with discussions about the role of television and education in childhood. He argued "*Sesame Street*'s serious side used television to prepare

---

[15] Shalom M. Fisch, *Children's Learning from Educational Television: Sesame Street and Beyond*, LEA's Communication Series (L. Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 17.
[16] Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio, *"G" Is for "Growing": Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*, LEA's Communication Series (L. Erlbaum Associates, 2001).
[17] Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street,* (Viking, 2008).
[18] Evan Richardson, "Getting from Sesame Street to Sesamstrasse: The Development of Sesame Street's International Adaptations, 1970-1978," *Columbia Journal of History*, 7, no. 2 (Spring 2022-23): 1-30.

children for school and to spread a message of tolerance for diversity."[19] Davis, Richardson, Morrow, and other *Sesame Street* scholars frequently drew on the CTW Archives as material for their research because of its diverse sources, depth of information, and files and files of kids thinking they can draw Big Bird accurately.

At the same time, attention to the letters of criticism that the show received was strictly summary or with minimal analysis, but never as a cohesive projection onto the social conflicts of the 1970s. Davis mentioned *Sesame Street* letters but offered little in the way of analysis. In one example, he shared excerpts from Cooney's response to Wilma Scott Heide, the 1972 President of the National Organization for Women (NOW), who had argued the goals of feminism and the goals of helping disadvantaged children were one in the same.[20] Davis explored how feminists and activists criticized *Sesame Street* by including their correspondence but failed to consider how their ideas about the show fit into a broader conversation about women's rights in the United States during the 1970s. Likewise, Morrow acknowledged the fan mail *Sesame Street* received, noting its size and majority positive comments. Yet, he found that "there were also many who wrote in outrage and dismay, and CTW naturally paid closer attention to these dissenting voices than it did to approving ones." He described a highlight reel of the critical letters in order to conclude the show "acted as a magnet for almost any concern regarding children."[21] Rather than generalizing the criticism as plentiful and widespread, I expand on how the critiques of *Sesame Street* reflect deeper social conversations about nutrition, motherhood, and the role of women in the 1970s. Debates around children's shows mean more than a community or country arguing about what to teach for school readiness: they are useful in

[19] Robert W. Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), x.
[20] Davis, *Street Gang,* 213-216.
[21] Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform,*118, 119.

elaborating on social and cultural conflicts, in revealing viewers' values, and in considering what identities Americans adopted.

In order to receive an amount of mail only rivaled by Santa Claus, somebody needed to create a television show. A 1966 New York dinner party with TV producer Joan Ganz Cooney, Vice President of Carnegie Corporation Lloyd Morrisett, and Director of Programming at a New York City educational television channel, Lewis Freedman, sparked the ultimate conversation of the power of television for young children.[22] Encouraged by Morrisett and Freedman, Cooney wrote the landmark report, "The Potential Uses of Television in Preschool Education" (1966), in consultation with educators, psychology experts, and television producers from around North America. To secure funding from the Carnegie Corporation, the federal government, and other stakeholders for a television show, Cooney demonstrated the "national awakening to the need for more and better education" alongside the "academic achievement gap between disadvantaged and middle class children" demanded an intervention.[23] Child welfare and education were not new topics to a 1960s sociopolitical climate interested in helping early learners and advancing social reform issues. In addition to *Sesame Street,* Head Start became a potential answer for how to help disadvantaged children. A useful predecessor, Head Start intentionally attempted to bring researchers and educators together to reach children where they were but not without competition from the future television series.

Originally launched as a summer program in 1965, Head Start's widespread goals concentrated on physical health, mental wellness, and cultural exploration for the children who

---

[22] Richard M. Polsky, *Getting to Sesame Street: Origins of the Children's Television Workshop*, (Praeger, 1975), 10.
[23] Gerald S. Lesser, *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street*, (Random House, 1974), 13. Achievement gap was a forward-thinking term of the time and used to describe a disparity in educational results among groups of students, for instance Black students and White students. However, scholars now use the term opportunity gap to refer to the disparities in resource distribution and tools needed for students to succeed. While the achievement gap focuses on the outputs of the educational system, the opportunity gap looks at the inputs and causes of inequalities.

attended as a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty."[24] The eight-week program cost $84 million, or $150 per student, with most of the money funding personnel, equipment, and child transportation.[25] With such an expensive bill, Head Start needed major wins at the evaluation stage to justify expansion. Multiple studies found gains in cognitive and other areas of development but other studies concluded no growth or inconclusive results about whether Head Start positively contributed to a child's development. The record on Head Start was labeled as a mixed bag when in reality, "impressionistic evidence of the success or failure of Head Start and similar programs competed with the few in-depth, scientifically oriented investigations of early childhood development for media attention."[26] Juxtaposing the chaos in the research lab with the high price tag, Head Start had to put up a fight when *Sesame Street* came to town. Yale psychologist Dr. Edward Zigler, an expert stakeholder for Head Start, explained the Office of Education "could get *Sesame Street* to reach poor kids by spending sixty-five cents per child. Why should we spend over a thousand dollars per child on Head Start?"[27] While Head Start has evolved since its initial intense summer, the ideas of joining education and psychology experts together via a government-funded program with clear criteria for success were important stepping stones for any children's interventionist program, including *Sesame Street.*

Just as Head Start served a need through in-person interventionist programs, *Sesame Street*'s advocates believed the television show could offer educational opportunities in living

---

[24] Maris A. Vinovskis, *The Birth of Head Start: Preschool Education Policies in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 88.
[25] Vinovskis, *The Birth of Head Start*, 91.
[26] Vinovskis, *The Birth of Head Start*, 103, 104.
[27] Edward Zigler and Susan Muenchow, *Head Start: The inside Story of America's Most Successful Educational Experiment* (BasicBooks, 1992), 165. Zigler continued on to describe how the office wanted Head Start to sponsor Sesame Street. Zigler responded, "I said I would give Head Start money to 'Sesame Street' if they could answer this question: How long would a poor child have to watch 'Sesame Street' to get his or her teeth filled? When nobody could answer, that was the end of the meeting. 'Sesame Street' deserves credit for entertaining and teaching millions of children both rich and poor, but it could never substitute for what Head Start has given to preschool children and their families."

rooms around the nation. In 1968, Cooney proposed creating the Children's Television Workshop to fill a much-needed gap in children's programming. This proposal secured $8 million in funding from the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the U.S. Government for one and a half years of development, followed by one year of shows.[28] While *Sesame Street* was still in development, who this $8 million national television program should benefit was an ongoing conversation. In pre-production years, when *Sesame Street* was still an imagined place, Cooney held firm that television could be an influential component of a disadvantaged child's education. In a section of her 1966 report titled "Television and the Disadvantaged Child," Cooney went against the dominant belief held by researchers that disadvantaged children could not benefit from educational television, writing "parents in the slums are just as concerned about their children's education as are their middle class counterparts, and have shown tremendous willingness to cooperate with any plan which holds out the promise of academic parity for their children."[29] However, with a potential show that had to be national in scope, Cooney and Morrisett became convinced that one group of children could never be singled out as the primary audience.

As the show came closer to reality, CTW executives danced around the debate of targeting advantaged versus disadvantaged audiences. Harvard psychologist and *Sesame Street* advisor Gerald Lesser reflected, "we hoped that poor children would learn as much and that the gap would not be widened, despite the fact that almost all comparisons of educational progress show middle-class children proceeding more rapidly."[30] During early evaluations of *Sesame Street*, disadvantaged children were constantly tested on both learning outcomes and enjoyment of the show. Nevertheless, these evaluations whether disadvantaged children made learning

[28] Lesser, *Children and Television*, 35.
[29] Joan Ganz Cooney, *The Potential Uses of Television for Preschool Education*, 1966, 43.
[30] Lesser, *Children and Television*, 81.

gains, circling back to the question of whether they could be considered a primary audience at all. Looking back in a 1998 interview, Cooney explained *Sesame Street* was "not aimed solely at minority children and inner city children and rural impoverished children but that was to be the bullseye if there was a target."[31] Ultimately, *Sesame Street* balanced reaching the televisions of every child with extra attention towards the disadvantaged "by crafting the curriculum with an eye toward the needs of the poor and by making an effort to ensure that they saw the show."[32]

As *Sesame Street* defined its audience, the show also needed to define itself from the other television programs of the past. One potential model for the perfect television show was *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955), which targeted preadolescent viewers with "moralism, patriotism, and advice." The producers of that show "endeavored to carry out Walt Disney's goal of fashioning 'a better world of tomorrow' and to create 'the leaders of the twenty-first century.'"[33] However, *The Mickey Mouse Club* did not attract younger audiences, who were already underserved by television programs. Moving into the 1960s, the few children's programs that existed would come to be known as "Saturday morning cartoons" with loud visuals, sensational advertisements, and little to no educational content. Speaking to commercialism, children's television became the new frontier for advertising as "with age-segregated audiences, advertisers of toys, candy, and sugared cereals, who had previously not found television an economical medium, increased their sponsorship of children's shows."[34] Despite the success of these cartoons and advertisements, the creators of *Sesame Street* wanted to avoid commercial advertising while still making learning exciting for its youngest viewers. *Sesame Street* filled a clear gap in television programming for preschool audiences because, according to the A.C.

---

[31] "Joan Ganz Cooney Interview," interview by Shirley Wershba, *Television Academy Foundation,* April 22 and 27, 1998, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/joan-ganz-cooney?clip=43310#interview-clips
[32] Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform*, 61.
[33] Howard Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York University Press, 2007), 154.
[34] Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform*, 19.

Nielsen Company, in 1969, the year of *Sesame Street*'s debut, *Captain Kangaroo* was the only one out of the top ten daytime programs for the two-to-five age group classified as a children's show.[35] An interest in the preschool children was increasing on the government level through programs like Head Start and yet, right in the children's homes, they had nothing for them to watch that was both entertaining and enriching.

In order to deviate from the oversaturated Saturday morning cartoons, *Sesame Street* formed a set of measurable educational goals in coordination with producers, educators, and psychologists. Not only did these goals set them apart from other television programs, but they provided a framework for valid evaluation and a defendable product against potential challenges from caregivers and outside researchers. After a series of planning seminars, four categories of overlapping goals between production and evaluation emerged: Symbolic Representation, Problem Solving and Reasoning (Cognitive Processes), Familiarity with the Physical Environment, and Familiarity with the Social Environment.[36] These priorities became the foundation for every single choice *Sesame Street* made. After creating the four goals, stakeholders utilized results from numerous studies of children before the premiere and during the early days, to plan how to communicate these goals through television. Producers paid careful attention to both the format and content of *Sesame Street*, what behaviors characters modeled and what skills the episodes emphasized. Furthermore, they prioritized keeping the on-screen focus narrow while incorporating multiple modalities of communication, like drawings and words.[37] Finally, writers, artists, muppeteers, musicians, and other creatives worked to design a Sesame Street world aligned to those goals. On November 10, 1969, audiences heard "Sunny

[35] A.C. Nielsen Company, "Top ten programs (daytime) for 1969," report, box 44, folder 6, CTW Archives. In order, A.C. Nielsen's top ten programs for the two-to-five age group were *Captain Kangaroo, The Lucy Show, The Beverly Hillbillies, Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C., Bewitched, That Girl, Dark Shadows, Love of Life, Let's Make a Deal,* and *The Newlywed Game.*
[36] Lesser, *Children and Television*, 62-74.
[37] Lesser, *Children and Television*, 88-89.

day/Sweepin' the clouds away/On my way to where the air is sweet/Can you tell me how to get?/How to get to Sesame Street" and saw a commercial advertisement sponsored by the letter "W" for the very first time.[38] In a world of wild and wacky media, *Sesame Street* wrestled the world of children's television in a new direction; whether that direction was wondrous or wicked wavered widely amongst the newspapers, surveys, and letters about the program.

Once the world walked down Sesame Street on their televisions, the newspapers and media coverage was overwhelmingly positive as people responded to both the educational and prosocial content of the show. Jim Fiebig of the *Bremerton Washington Sun* celebrated the show as having "gone far beyond presenting blacks and whites as equals– it presents them as people."[39] Less than two weeks after its debut, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* discredited the argument that the show destroyed traditional school because "the virtue of *Sesame Street* is that it is not a formal school – it is a childhood experience in the limitless wonders of the world, and out of exposure to it come the rewards of reasoning and enlightenment painlessly absorbed."[40] Moving more towards the middle of the spectrum, Louise Sweeney of *The Christian Science Monitor* reported on a group of Head Start preschoolers who watched the premiere at the Abraham Lincoln Community Center in Harlem, New York. Although the children were unenthused by some of the longer dialogue portions of the show, "the jingly music that accompanied the lessons caught on quickly, so that it wasn't unusual to hear a child trilling 'Two! two two two two!' like his favorite song."[41] In the immediate weeks after *Sesame Street*'s premiere, the press jumped on board with talking muppets and letter commercials as the greatest cognitive and sociocultural opportunity for education in America.

---

[38] Sesame Street, "Sesame Street: Show Open Season 1," produced by Sesame Street, uploaded November 1, 2019, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwio5qGg8o4.
[39] Jim Fiebig, "Mark My Words," *Bremerton Washington Sun,* July 6, 1970, box 152, CTW Archives.
[40] Jack Gould, "This 'Sesame' May Open the Right Doors," *New York Times,* November 23, 1969.
[41] Louise Sweeney, "TV: seeing 'Sesame Street' through the eyes of Harlem," *The Christian Science Monitor,* November 14, 1969, box 152, CTW Archives.

Along with the praise, criticism of *Sesame Street* filled the newspapers. Adele Z. Silver of *The Plain Dealer* explained the main flaw of the show was its teaching style, which she described as "moving too fast; it stresses energy and style over feeling and thought; its teachers elicit answers as cut-and-dried, right-or-wrong, as any old fashion's schoolmarm's."[42] While many Americans praised *Sesame Street* for its racial diversity, others believed the show had gone too far to include Black and White characters on the same street. David Wilson of the *Boston Globe* disapproved of *Sesame Street*'s teachings outside of numbers and letters to societal understandings, "for if the tube arrogates to itself the power to try to inculcate the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it is perfectly capable of trying to persuade me that Aryans are superior."[43] In a letter to the editor of the *Jackson Daily News*, Mrs. Harry Scrivner scrutinized the "repetitious subjection to the senses of sight and sound" on *Sesame Street* as mind-washing indoctrination of the mind "into an anti-Christian, Un-patriotic, Unnatural disregard for racial pride and into conformity to One-Worldism."[44] Though the last two examples of criticism were harsher than most, they illustrated how people used *Sesame Street* as their disguise to comment on 1970s social debates.

While the praise and criticism found in newspapers were intended for a wide audience, *Sesame Street* letters served as more intimate moments of celebration or protest between the addresser and addressee. One letter to executives came from a grandmother and former teacher who wanted to share that the program's methods were "fantastically effective!"[45] Another letter was sent by a Christian woman who was upset at the gender role reversal of making Maria, a human character, a construction worker.[46] Thousands of letters to *Sesame Street* spoke to broader

[42] Adele Z. Silver, "Flaws in Best of Children's TV," *The Plain Dealer,* October 28, 1971, box 157, folder 15, CTW Archives.
[43] David Wilson, "A look at TV–ads and all," *Boston Globe,* November 23, 1969.
[44] Mrs. Harry Scrivner, letter to the editor, *Jackson Daily News,* August 13, 1971.
[45] Mrs. Wendell Verna Paul to Sesame Street, letter, Grinnell, IA, July 10, 1974, box 46, folder 32, CTW Archives.
[46] Mrs. Norman Giannukos to Mr. Hatch, letter, Deer Park, TX, January 10, 1975, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.

1970s social conversations, including but not limited to conversations on nutrition and breastfeeding as well as the role of women, as women did or did not self-identify as mothers within the body paragraphs of those letters. From the salutation to the signature, the letters, while concentrated on *Sesame Street* content, can be extrapolated so that any comment about a muppet on the television could be applied to a movement of the time. As they addressed and signed their letters, the authors inadvertently revealed some assumptions about gender roles. Speaking to the salutation, writers addressed their letters in a variety of ways. One of the most common greetings was "Dear Sirs" followed by "Dear Sirs and Madams," "Dear Mrs/Ms.. Cooney," and "Dear Mr. Hatch."[47] While it cannot be said that all letters with feminist attitudes opened with "Madam" or "Mrs./Ms. Cooney" and all letters with traditional women attitudes opened with "Dear Sirs," there were enough letters beginning with a male-dominated salutation that spoke to the climate of the 1970s, when it would be assumed that a woman could not be in charge of a television show. Women signed their letters in two main ways; first name last name or Mrs. husband's first name last name. Again, the preferred signature cannot be determined by the content that precedes it. Yet, the fact that a notable number of letters from women still used their husband's name also spoke to the attitudes around coverture that still existed in the 1970s despite strides from the feminist movement to change them.

The content of the *Sesame Street* letters was just as revealing as the salutations and signatures. One category of criticism *Sesame Street* received was for the promotion of lackluster nutrition values. These critiques mostly targeted the Cookie Monster muppet who was known for interrupting scenes and scarfing down his namesake dessert. A twenty-one year old Illinois mother of two preschoolers complained Cookie Monster promoted "selfish, grabby, and

[47] Robert Hatch was a public relations executive and the Vice President for Public Affairs for the CTW. For further reading on his career and connection to *Sesame Street*; Margalit Fox, "Robert A. Hatch, 75, Journalist Who Promoted 'Sesame Street', Dies," *New York Times,* June 23, 2006.

glutinous" values in children because every time he came on screen, she had to rush to the kitchen to fetch a cookie.[48] Though she did not call out Cookie Monster by name, a Maryland mother argued *Sesame Street*'s primary flaw was "SUGAR!" because "diet affects health generally, learning capacity, bone and tooth structure and health."[49]A New Jersey mother suggested instead of having Cookie Monster chomp down on his usual sweet treat, he could have a toothache and a dentist would come tell him to stop eating cookies and instead "snack on bananas or some other fruit."[50] It is worth mentioning that many children and some grownups stuck up for the sugary snack eater, for instance, one mother wrote that her child consumes plenty of fruits and vegetables regardless of what Cookie Monster eats.[51] Nevertheless, nutrition critics claimed *Sesame Street* amplified poor health habits in the youngest of Americans, which went as far as a Pennsylvania mother being upset that her baby's first word was cookie.[52]

In terms of intentionality and seriousness towards change, *Sesame Street* deserved a participation trophy for its acknowledgement of the letters focused on nutrition. A vague response from an information assistant explained how the newest season of the show will "introduce more 'good' foods" and "this, in addition to strong parental guidance at home, will help to induce healthful eating habits."[53] The response was followed by recommendations of possible health topics that could be covered on *Sesame Street*, including dental care, exercise, hygiene, nutrition, and health practices, in a way that is comprehensive for preschoolers. On their own, the well-developed recommendations responded to the critiques and questions in the

---

[48] Mary Louise Seiler, letter, Deerfield, IL, box 45, folder 42, CTW Archives.
[49] Charlotte Hard, letter, Bethesda, MD, November 15, 1970, box 45, folder 48, CTW Archives. Although it was not preserved in the collection, Hard mentioned in her letter that she attached a book from a dentist that contained dental health and hygiene recommendations to be implemented on the show.
[50] Patricia D. Fairfield to *Sesame Street*, letter, Newark, NJ, May 11, 1972, box 45, folder 13, CTW Archives.
[51] Mrs. Fran Saber, letter, July 26, 1972, box 45, folder 11, CTW Archives.
[52] Mrs. Harold F. Marcus, letter, October 28, 1975, box 45, folder 42, CTW Archives.
[53] Children's Television Workshop Staff, response letter and desk note, February 2, box 45, folder 31, CTW Archives.

viewers' letters. Unfortunately, these recommendations become tainted when examining the desk note attached to the response, which reads "here's our old letter. Does it hold up? Should we embellish?" from a man named Stu. The reply to Stu was even more disappointing, as future executive producer of *Sesame Street*, Lewis Bernstein wrote back, "yes embellish!" Although it was noteworthy that *Sesame Street* developed a response and recommendations to nutrition criticism, the office chatter that most would never have seen revealed a different side to a show known for honesty.

These debates over Cookie Monster spoke to ongoing conversations in American politics and culture in the 1970s, as more people expressed a desire for organic, unprocessed foods. Science writer Sandra Blakeslee asserted in her 1969 *New York Times* article, "when a housewife strolls into a supermarket today she is confronted with a cornucopia of things she can shake 'n' bake, brown 'n' serve, whip 'n' chill or heat 'n' eat. But now more and more shoppers are beginning to eye the labels on products with suspicion, trying to find out whether the foods they shake, brown, heat and whip are really safe to eat."[54] A heightened awareness of what additives, pesticides, and potentially harmful ingredients were found in processed foods pushed consumers away from refined sugar and towards organic. Nutritionist Adelle Davis wrote in her 1970 self-help book titled *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit* that people were "deluged at almost every meal by sugar coming from cheap, starchy foods: cereals, breads…cake, pies, cookies, and other varieties of pastry." She insisted sugar was "a body requirement" though "it should be obtained from unrefined, natural sources."[55] Food scholar Jeffrey Haydu corroborated Davis' anti-refinement viewpoint by arguing the organic food movement "gave to 'natural' the added meaning and merit of nonconformity… and believed that the food system could be changed if we

[54] Sandra Blakeslee, "Food Safety a Worry in Era of Additives," *New York Times,* November 9, 1969.
[55] Adelle Davis, *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 52.

acted out our values in our individual lives."[56] Authors of the *Sesame Street* letters displayed their values when crafting their message in hopes of enacting change to benefit their children's wellbeing. The skepticism of Cookie Monster's favorite treat was reflective of general societal skepticism towards processed foods as respectable food choices.

Another aspect of nutrition that *Sesame Street* viewers tackled in their letters was breastfeeding. In a 1974 episode, a short segment on nursing babies highlighted how various animals nurse their young, with the final clip being a human mother and baby.[57] Although minimal criticism about the clip ruining a child's innocence or not belonging on the show came up, an overwhelmingly positive response emerged. A Florida mother shared how meaningful this segment was as she breastfed her own son and happily reported "it seems breastfeeding is finally 'catching on' again."[58] A Minnesota mother praised *Sesame Street* for normalizing breastfeeding and went as far to say children "hopefully won't grow up thinking breasts are only for looking at - a sex object - but that they are useful - curated with a wonderful purpose - to give nourishment and extra special closeness that can't be duplicated."[59] Activist women also wrote in support of showing breastfeeding mothers, as in the case of one letter from the Islip, New York chapter of the La Leche League and another on behalf of a league member in Texas. Originally formed in response to the lack of support for nursing mothers, La Leche League has widely influenced maternal and infant care for almost seventy years. With twenty-one signatures, the Islip La Leche League letter cheered on *Sesame Street* "for its natural and beautiful scene."[60] As a national

---

[56] Jeffrey Haydu, *Upsetting Food: Three Eras of Food Protest in the United States* (Temple University Press, 2021), 121.
[57] Sesame Street, "Sesame Street: Nursing Babies," produced by Sesame Street, uploaded April 16, 2010, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a9Xqu_c9Yo. These letters focused on a 1974 clip about nursing mammals. In 1977, a second controversy over breastfeeding occurred when singer Buffy Sainte-Marie nursed her baby during an episode.
[58] Betty Gould, letter, Miami, FL, May 5, 1974, box 45, folder 10, CTW Archives.
[59] Phillis Bennett, letter, Alberta, MN, May 7, 1974, box 45, folder 10, CTW Archives.
[60] Mrs. Andrea Williams, letter, East Islip, NY, box 45, folder 10, CTW Archives.

organization, the league influenced community-building efforts related to breastfeeding, such as "in the early 1970s, Marie Walter enlisted the help of La Leche League to speak to nursing mothers and record breastfeeding beliefs that were preserved in oral traditions."[61] Women who praised *Sesame Street*'s inclusion of a nursing mother in their letters aligned to the activism of the La Leche League trying to destigmatize breastfeeding, with both activities exemplifying leveraging a motherhood identity for social change.[62]

The letters to *Sesame Street* discussing gender roles from feminist women, traditional women, and those who fell somewhere in between were among the most well-documented perspectives in the CTW collection. These conversations about gender were often reflected upon by *Sesame Street* stakeholders in the moment and later in life. Researcher Gerald Lesser described the critics' arguments about sexist stereotypes in female characters and countered with *Sesame Street's* representation of Black men as involved fathers. He wrote, "we did not intend, however, to bolster male identification at the expense of misrepresenting or excluding feminine models, and as time went on, we searched for opportunities to present females in positive, distinctive roles."[63] In a similar fashion, Cooney contemplated the criticism in two different ways, first with the human housewife character of Susan. Cooney agreed with Lesser's argument, "we had thought that it was a nice idea to have a strong black man supporting his wife," she revealed, "but the show could not seem to win." When *Sesame Street* made Susan a nurse, NOW continued to criticize the character because nursing was seen as a woman's profession. Cooney responded to the accusations, "fine, that's what she's going to do because she wouldn't be a brain surgeon after all." When asked about not having any female puppets on the

[61] Joanna Wolfarth, *Milk: An Intimate History of Breastfeeding,* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2023), 225.
[62] For further reading on breastfeeding and the activism of the La Leche League: Jule DeJager Ward*, La Leche League at the Crossroads of Medicine, Feminism, and Religion,* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Lynne Y. Weiner, "Reconstructing Motherhood: The La Leche League in Postwar America," *The Journal of American History* 80*,* no. 4 (1994): 1357–81.
[63] Lesser, *Children and Television*, 199-200.

show, Cooney acknowledged the legitimacy of the claim and replied "but Jim did not have female muppeteers and it's a very physical activity and very hard work… I mean it was even though his own wife was a puppeteer it was like he didn't think of women as able to do that kind of work."[64] It is worth mentioning *Sesame Street* stakeholders recognized and responded to gendered criticism of the show because it exemplified social conversations between those with power and those who want change, even if there were different understandings of how the world should operate.

Exploring the gender stereotypes on *Sesame Street* was not an exclusively private conversation between letter writers and the CTW. In addition to the letters, public fights on the pages of prominent newspapers debated what gender representation and equality meant for the 1970s under the disguise of Big Bird. On December 17, 1970, *Boston Globe* journalist Ellen Goodman published an editorial titled "The male, Male, MALE world of Sesame Street," where she asserted the only two female characters on *Sesame Street* were Susan and a cow. Goodman explained *Sesame Street* condemned women to one of three categories, "teacher, simp and mother (who more often than not is a combination of teacher and simp). Oh, yes, and cow." She concluded, "no one is asking for a party-line miniature women's lib show, or for a televised world where men are cooking while women read the paper (sigh). Nor am I saying to throw 'Sexual Politics' through the screen. But how about a Sesame Street inhabited by little girls with as good egos as the boys, with strong female role models."[65] The next day, journalist Martin F. Nolan replied to Goodman's article with his piece titled "What gender is Big Bird?" Nolan opened his response to Goodman with "your latest dispatch from the front captured vividly the shameless seizure of Sesame Street by the Men's Liberation Movement. I hope you drive it off

[64] Cooney, interview by Wershba, 1998, NOW stands for National Organization for Women and will be discussed in greater detail later on.. Jim Henson was a puppeteer on *Sesame Street* famous for creating The Muppets.
[65] Ellen Goodman, "The male, Male, MALE world of Sesame Street," *Boston Globe,* December 17, 1970.

the air, then go after football, hockey, Hogan's Heroes and other bastions of male, male, male chauv." Nolan argued that he had never heard of any woman "who felt inferior to a male because they were too busy working to be bothered with roleplaying."[66] The debate over gender representation and roles on *Sesame Street* was not exclusive to the city of Boston nor to the editorial pages. However, these conversations about women on *Sesame Street* reflected broader social attitudes about gender representation during the 1970s and what people ruffled their feathers over in order to support or resist feminist goals.

Gendered criticism from letter writers toward *Sesame Street* focused on similar arguments to Goodman's, including the lack of female characters and muppets on the show as well as stereotypical or sexist representations of women in the few roles on screen. A Michigan mother tracked the number of times in one half-hour segment male and female characters appeared and concluded a supermajority of the time was dedicated to the males. She implored CTW executives to consider what values they promoted through these depictions. "What are you telling young girls," she asked, "about their importance in the world? What are you telling them about the intelligence of the women they need to identify with when virtually all of your puppets and cartoon figures are male?"[67] A California mother continued the trend of counting male and female characters, breaking it down to "at least 32 male character [sic] as apposed [sic] to 11 female characters and 15 male voices as apposed [sic] to one female voice" in one episode alone.[68] Taking a more jovial tone, a California grandmother complained "how does it happen that your elegant series has no Grandma person, hmmm???"[69] when the show featured the older Mr. Hooper, a recurring human shopkeeper on the show. Many gender complaints from mothers

---

[66] Martin F. Nolan, "What gender is Big Bird?," *Boston Globe,* December 18, 1970.
[67] Susan Wildfong, letter, Holly, MI, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.
[68] Barbara Colbert, letter, Torrance, CA, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[69] Sally Higginbotham to Mr. Stone, letter, San Jose, CA, box 46, folder 1, CTW Archives. Jon Stone was a writer and producer on *Sesame Street.*

and women revolved around numerical representation of women, as evidenced by the Brooklyn, New York chapter of NOW urging *Sesame Street* to "give half time to women on the show - since half of [its] viewers are members of that sex."[70]

In addition to statistical representation, *Sesame Street* faced criticism for the depictions of women presented on the show in regular character arcs and in educational content. A Rochester, New York mother shared her daughter "is getting funny ideas like only men can be doctors or dentists or grocers. She's actually told [her] some of these facts + added 'on *Sesame Street* they are all boys.'"[71] A Washington mother stressed "the overall balance seems to be on the side of portraying boys and men as being the dominant, interesting real people and girls and women as being ancillary or else helpful to men in their endeavors."[72] An Endicott, New York, mother labeled an alphabet commercial on the letter D as sexist, as she wrote, "in the examples used for professions beginning with the letter D, a girl was shown as a dancer, but men were shown as a doctor, dentist, ditch-digger, and detective."[73] A second letter from a Massachusetts mother corroborated these remarks and further built out her critique by listing all of the male and female characters on *Sesame Street.* When only the male list caused her to need a second piece of paper, the sexist argument made itself clear.[74] A Missouri mother continued the alphabet interrogation by tackling the letter K's subtle transmission of sex stereotypes: "when the kitten who was knitting in the kitchen spoke, it was with the voice of a female. Thus putting woman [sic] in the role as a kitten (sex object), knitting (an activity of mainly women), and in the kitchen (her

[70] Rochelle Edelman to Ms. Cooney, letter, Brooklyn, NY, February 26, 1973, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[71] Sandra LaBella to "Sesame Street" people, letter, Rochester, NY, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.
[72] Pamela Parsons to Mrs. Cooney, letter, Ridgefield, WA, March 3, 1973, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives. On this typed letter, there was a written post script that explained the intersectionality of race and gender with now-outdated language. It reads "P.S., There are so many yellow, brown, red, black, and white women who are doing successful work: Shirley Chisholm, Maya Angelou, Yvonne Brathwaite, Sandra Hochman, Doris Lessing. There are also women doctors and lawyers and scientists and office workers. They all have names. They are all real people."
[73] Roslyn Rakoff, letter, Endicott, NY, June 20, 1973, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[74] Laura Feldberg, letter, Belmont, MA, December 19, 1972, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.

rightful place).”[75] A California mother summarized the emotions behind the issue in her letter as she exclaimed “PU-LEEEZZE [sic] do something about your sexism” and suggested “how about making the female-girl-women characters interesting, fun, humorous, adventurous, even bitchy if necessary. But do put them into the world of *Sesame Street* - which I can assure you is the REAL world to my 3 year old daughter.”[76]

Although the concerns about numerical and content representation are valuable, it is also worth discussing the identity intersections between women who did or did not identify as feminists and women who did or did not identify as mothers in their letters. These intersections often provided the greatest insight into the broader social conversations of the 1970s. A Maryland mother who identified herself as a member of NOW requested a statement on sexism from *Sesame Street* and reminded Cooney that “the minority worse off in this country is the women of the minority races.”[77] An Oklahoma mother who self-described as “not an activist in the feminist movement” raised a point on behalf of her three-year-old daughter who wanted to know “why most of her friends on *Sesame Street* are boys and why there are not more girls.”[78] A Georgia woman “writing both as a concerned parent and as a member of the National Task-force on the Image of Women for the National Organization for Women” shared girls and boys alike would benefit from exposure to “women who are more than ‘mommies and teachers.’”[79] A Massachusetts feminist who did not explicitly identify herself as a mother argued the show “is, in its own way, a reflection of sexism in society–something that a progressive program like your

[75] Phyllis S. Taylor, letter, Grandview, MO, January 27, 1976, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[76] Lori Deng to Sesame Street, letter, San Francisco, CA, July 24, 1972, box 45, folder 16, CTW Archives.
[77] Kathleen M. Elroy to Mrs. Cooney, letter, Bethesda, MD, September 11, 1971, box 17, folder 42, CTW Archives.
[78] Doris Taryle to Ms. Long and Mr. Moss, letter, Clinton, OK, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives. Loretta Long played the character of Susan on *Sesame Street.* Jeffrey Moss was a composer for the show.
[79] Jean W. Lockard to Ms. Cooney, letter, East Point, GA, March 15, 1972, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.

own should be interested in changing."[80] These statements and intersectional identities centered the critical comments of gender on *Sesame Street* in the feminist movement.

The most simplistic definition of a feminist is a person who believes in total political, economic, and social equality for all genders.[81] In its most representative sense, feminists look incredibly different depending on their ideas, strategies, and people they serve.[82] The waves of feminism's influence rose to great peaks and crashed hard into the sand of American history but historians commonly characterized the 1960s and 1970s as the period of second wave feminism. The Civil Rights Movement and previous feminist activism of the 1920s coupled with more women seeking out higher education, delaying marriage, and utilizing the scientific innovation of the birth control pill influenced feminism in the 1970s.[83] Several women's groups and collectives formed in response to feminist ideas, including NOW and the Redstockings, under a common understanding of challenging gendered values to create an equal society.[84] However, the movement split into two factions, liberal feminism and radical feminism, based on whether they wanted to make change inside the system or tear it down. As historian Bruce Schulman compared the two schools of thought, "while NOW liberals sought inclusion into established American institutions on equal terms with men, radical feminists scorned that 'naive' objective. They wanted to eliminate the patriarchal sex caste system."[85] Although it is fair to say *Sesame Street* letters represented both liberal and radical feminist attitudes, a majority of the letters aligned with a liberal perspective of reform from inside the existing system, or, the television.

The strongest example of liberal feminism during the second wave came out of author and activist Betty Friedan's 1966 hotel room at the gathering of State Commissions on the Status

[80] Barbara L. Barros, letter, Holyoke, MA, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[81] Laura Brunell and Elinor Burkett, "Feminism," in *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 2024.
[82] Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, (Free Press, 2004), 3.
[83] Evans, *Tidal Wave,*, 21.
[84] Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 22, 27.
[85] Schulman, *The Seventies*, 164-165.

of Women in Washington, D.C.. The original group of about twenty women, who convened to discuss the potential of "an independent national civil rights organization," would eventually form the National Organization for Women.[86] Friedan and others disappeared from NOW leadership within the early years, but their replacements left an impactful legacy on women's rights. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission commissioner Aileen Hernandez, Republican housewife and artist Patricia Hill Burnett, and working-class, recent college graduate Mary Jean Collins laid an extensive and intersectional foundation for NOW's future by representing different backgrounds. With an imposing goal that "a national feminist organization needed ideological unity and geographical diversity," NOW suffered many internal battles on what to say on subjects such as race, sexuality, labor, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and abortion.[87] In the face of diverse priorities, geographical distance, and personal prejudices, members "also discovered that while NOW was an unstable coalition, it could bend without breaking."[88] Because of NOW's resilience amidst internal and external attacks, the organization's efforts were transformative rather than successful or unsuccessful. Praising the battle itself rather than a victor explains why even having conversations about feminism at all within the *Sesame Street* letters reflect onto broader 1970s society.

NOW's early intersectional activism took multiple forms to advocate for gender equality in relation to fights for racial equality occuring in those same years. Both NOW and ordinary letter writers to varying degrees rejected *Sesame Street'*s approach of representing Black men as involved fathers because that representation sacrificed the role of capable women. In July of 1971, the New York City chapter of NOW wrote to executives at General Foods, a company with

[86] Katherine Turk, *The Women of NOW: How Feminists Built an Organization That Transformed America*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 11, 12.
[87] Turk, *The Women of NOW*, 75.
[88] Turk, *The Women of NOW*, 144.

monetary ties to *Sesame Street*, threatening a boycott of their products unless a NOW representative reviewed the show. Anne Grant West, Co-coordinator of the Education Committee, listed how certain character interactions suggested gender inferiority and asserted on behalf of the NYC chapter, "*Sesame Street* adds animation to the conviction that women must be subordinated if black men are to regain their sense of personal dignity."[89] A New York mother proclaimed the show had "done so much in terms of racial discrimination" and she believed the show "could do a lot for women."[90] A Massachusetts mother named Nancy Sobowale echoed NOW's sentiments in a five page letter, writing that she "doesn't understand why the excuse for sex stereotyping is that the purpose of 'Sesame Street' is to develop better racial attitudes and 'a strong, competent male image'" and implored Cooney to consider "is [her] daughter to be told that her blackness makes her a worthy human being, but that her femaleness puts her into a category which is not fully human?"[91] In a private desk note to Dr. Edward Palmer, a co-founder and researcher at CTW, Cooney's one sentence read "while this woman is a raving Women's Lib lady, it is also interesting to note she is also black." In her three sentence response to Sobowale, Cooney recognized Sobowale's "valid points" and pointed out that *Sesame Street* has had "consultants from NOW".[92] Two of the most involved consultants, Susan Chase and Cynthia Eaton, were tasked with analyzing sex role stereotyping on *Sesame Street* and delivered twenty-four reports during their time with the show.

Unlike other materials, Chase and Eaton's reports were rarely annotated or followed up with more than a thank you. The level of influence Chase and Eaton's reports had over *Sesame Street* production is unclear. However, Cooney manipulated the feminist feedback in a September

[89] Anne Grant West to Ralph Cobb, letter, Brooklyn, NY, July 16, 1971, box 17, folder 42, CTW Archives.
[90] Judith A. Keating, letter, Pleasantville, NY, January 13, 1973, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[91] Nancy Sobowale to Joan Ganz Cooney, letter, Cambridge, MA, January 11, 1971, box 17, folder 40, CTW Archives.
[92] Joan Ganz Cooney to Nancy Sobowale, letter and desk note, New York, NY, January 28, 1971, box 17, folder 40, CTW Archives.

1972 response to a self-identified mother and feminist from Staten Island, New York, Ellen Comery. Comery called for "eliminating sex roles to free our children of oppression" to which Cooney replied that *Sesame Street* had an interest in "portraying fuller, more varied roles for women and girls."[93] Cooney continued by countering concerns over the character Susan, the lack of female muppets, and the re-airing of segments with alleged sexist undertones before boasting about the female *Sesame Street* staff. Despite all of the circumstantial evidence that pointed towards *Sesame Street* making changes in favor of gender equality, the most puzzling element of Cooney's reply was her specific examples of non-stereotypical female character interactions. Across three seasons, Cooney provided six instances of revolutionary behavior, including but not limited to one male character hanging out laundry, Goldilocks helping the bears realize there are three of them in a sketch, and "Oscar the Grouch finding a girlfriend, a female grouch who is a driver for a bus company."[94] The conversation via mail between Comery and Cooney are reflections of debates about women in society. At the same time, Cooney's response embodied some level of resistance to feminism, an idea that she allegedly came around to.[95] As a woman in leadership who in most moments authentically tried to get things right, Cooney sometimes demonstrated a lack of clear support towards the feminist movement. This choice opened up a new path for conservative perspectives to join the 1970s conversation about the role of women.

Just as feminists faced challenges in defining themselves, conservative women encompassed many identities and many beliefs. However, what united them in the 1970s was staunch opposition to the ERA and second wave feminism. Historian Stacey Taranto found that conservative women wanted more than to be "against feminist goals." Instead, "they tried to forge a more positive politics that allowed their followers to be for something. Echoing allies

[93] Ellen Comery, letter, Staten Island, NY, August 11, 1972, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[94] Joan G. Cooney to Ellen Comery, letter, New York, NY, September 19, 1972, box 45, folder 30, CTW Archives.
[95] Davis, *Street Gang*, 63.

elsewhere, the women opposed legal abortion by being 'pro-life' for fetuses, not against reproductive rights. They embraced heteronormative gender roles and rejected new legal rights for women by being 'pro-family.'"[96] One of the most influential conservative women, Phyllis Schlafly, utilized the pro-family mindset to her advantage on a national scale to stop the ratification of the ERA. Schlafly created and unified a 1972 anti-ERA movement made up of "religious conservatives from groups hostile to one another. She accomplished this by emphasizing their common belief in the primacy of divinely created gender roles and familial structure while respecting denominational differences."[97] Furthermore, conservative women played up the image of the underdog and "to sympathizers outside their group, they were populist heroines struggling against a powerful profeminist establishment. To themselves, they were courageous crusaders strengthened by a divine hand."[98] In order to generate appeal and compete in conversation with feminists, conservative women focused on the restoration of traditional American life or the insulting remarks of the feminist movement, both of which can be seen in letters to *Sesame Street.*

Feminist critiques of *Sesame Street* outnumbered the conservative but the letters that exist were an important part of the societal conflict about the role of women. Some letters spoke to preserving pro-family values, like in the case of a Utah mother who wrote, "it seems you loose [sic] sight of the forest for the few trees that you sacrifice the stability of the most important unit - the family - for the gratification of a few unsatisfied persons."[99] A Deer Park, Texas mother sought to protect the familial institutions of the past, "I will not subject my children nor myself to

---

[96] Stacie Taranto, *Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 5.
[97] Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politic*s (Bloomsbury, 2017), 92.
[98] Spruill, *Divided We Stand*, 95.
[99] Mrs. Ronald H. Olson, letter, Orem, UT, February 18, 1976, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.

programs trying to abolish the 'traditional' roles of men and women - we are not equal."[100] Other conservative letters attacked feminism, such as a Lubbock, Texas mother who repeatedly called out *Sesame Street* for portraying "lib" attitudes.[101] Mrs. Pam Bishop, who served as the Chairman of Concerned Citizens for the Family in Montgomery County, Texas incorporated more expressive language to convey her disdain for the "libbists." She wrote in reference to the feminists, "they are not concerned about the welfare of their children and husbands at home as they should be. In fact, most of the 'libbists' don't even have children, much more a husband."[102]

How *Sesame Street* affected children was harshly debated by feminists, social conservatives, women, mothers, journalists, producers, and everyone in between as people felt compelled to speak out on the first example of influential educational television. Whether the show taught children diversity, cookie overconsumption, sexism, letters, numbers, tolerance, or atheism and totalitarianism[103] depended on who was asked and yet, the final verdict always came down to the scientists. Countless surveys analyzed the impact of *Sesame Street* on children in the first five years, with two notable studies being Samuel Ball and and Gerry Ann Bogatz's *The First Year of Sesame Street: An Evaluation* and Daniel Yankelovich's *A Report on the Role and Penetration of Sesame Street in Ghetto Communities (Bedford Stuyvesant, East Harlem, Chicago, and Washington D.C.)*. Published in 1970, Ball and Bogatz assessed if preschool-aged children who viewed *Sesame Street* achieved the educational goals of the show and compared their learning performance across subgroups such as socioeconomic status, age, and viewing

---

[100] Mrs. Norman Giannukos to Mr. Hatch, letter, Deer Park, TX, January 10, 1975, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.
[101] V. Sue Ball, letter, Lubbock, TX, January 13, 1975, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.
[102] Mrs. Pam Bishop to Mr. Hatch, letter, Montgomery County, TX, January 9, 1975, box 45, folder 29, CTW Archives.
[103] David R. Wade, letter, Aurora, IL, February 18, 1974, box 45, folder 38, CTW Archives. Wade wrote in his pro-life letter,"the time has come to liberate our children from Atheist and totalitarian TV and to strike a blow for the right to life, as opposed to the license to practice the mass murder of the innocent and the defenseless in the name of social convenience and at the hire of the infamous Rockefeller Foundations, financiers for the Auschwitz of the unborn." Wade's letter was filed in the folder titled "Lunacy Letters".

time.[104] After conducting pre- and post-tests as well as pre- and post-parent surveys, they concluded *Sesame Street*'s impact was "educationally and statistically significant" for all children, with the greatest gains in younger children, children of lower socioeconomic status, and children who watched the show frequently.[105] Although Ball and Bogatz's sample had more geographical and socioeconomic diversity, Yankelovich narrowed in on urban communities to "determine the extent to which Sesame Street continued to reach underprivileged preschool children."[106] In 1973, Yankelovich administered questionnaires and conducted approximately 1,200 interviews with children and mothers. Quotes from these interviews celebrated the educational and humane values of *Sesame Street*, such as one East Harlem mother who said she "liked it because of the different races shown" while a mother from Bedford Stuyvesant commented she "liked the way it teaches them how to count and their ABC's, the difference between right and wrong and not being ashamed to tell the truth."[107] Each study celebrated *Sesame Street* for achieving its educational goals and offered little to no criticism of a show that managed to reach preschool children across the country with special attention towards the underprivileged, just as Cooney had dreamed of.

Though Ball and Bogatz's and Yankelovich's work contributed to an enhanced understanding of early childhood education, their understanding of who watched the show with their child is representative of 1970s gender expectations that women and mothers fought for or against in *Sesame Street*'s letters. Despite Ball and Bogatz labeling the pre- and post-questionnaires as "parent questionnaires," many questions were inherently targeted at women and mothers. Question forty on the parent pre-questionnaire asked "what was the last

---

[104] Samuel Ball and Gerry Ann Bogatz, *The First Year of Sesame Street: An Evaluation; a Report to the Children's Television Workshop* (Educational Testing Service, 1970), 6.
[105] Ball and Bogatz, *The First Year*, 366-371.
[106] Daniel Yankelovich, *A Report on the Role and Penetration of Sesame Street in Ghetto Communities (Bedford Stuyvesant, East Harlem, Chicago, and Washington D.C.)*, 1, April 1973, box 44, folder 2, CTW Archives.
[107] Yankelovich, *A Report on the Role*, 74, 81.

grade in school the male head of household completed?"[108] This question assumed the head of the household was a man and suggested the limited understanding of a changing American family in the 1970s. Despite increasing numbers of women entering the workforce, the program rightly assumed that mothers were responsible for their children's care and therefore, completion of the survey: ninety-five percent of parents who completed the pre-questionnaires were mothers, three percent were fathers. Yankelovich named mothers' assessments of *Sesame Street* as a criteria for success and explained mothers "continue to recognize and appreciate the educational role of Sesame Street. As in the past, they describe[d] how the program helps to better prepare their children for school, and to teach them to count, read and know the alphabet. Spanish speaking mothers, in particular, [were] grateful for the help the program provides in teaching English to their children."[109] Both studies included some aspects of gendered language that ultimately pointed toward women and mothers as the primary caregiver who watched *Sesame Street* and invested in their child's education.

The *Sesame Street* surveys served as an additional example of reexamining the show's discourse within the broader context of the 1970s. At face value, the *Sesame Street* letters, articles, and surveys represented ways in which people gave their input on an emerging children's television show with funny-looking puppets and engaging story lines. When given another glance, these sources revealed the cracks and fissures of 1970s society. The unresolved demands of women's liberation and the conservative pro-family movement battled it out through character and Muppet development as women and mothers raised their voices about issues they felt enabled to tackle based on their identity. However, the value of these letters is not in finding who is right about *Sesame Street*'s production choices. Instead, they offer a window into the

[108] Ball and Bogatz, *The First Year*, Appendix C, 7.
[109] Yankelovich, *A Report on the Role*, 14.

values of the 1970s for historians to gain insight about the human experience of living life with people from different backgrounds, an experience pioneered by *Sesame Street.* As one mother wrote in her letter, the educational content of *Sesame Street* did not impress her the most; rather, it is "the human feeling, the expression of love, the teaching of tolerance and acceptance. It is just great."[110] The greatness of the letters lies not in their individual words but in their collective quest to reach the sunny day where everything is a-okay on Sesame Streets across the nation.

[110] Lorna Caroll, letter, box 46, folder 30, CTW Archives.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archival Collections

University of Maryland (College Park, MD), Special Collections and University Archives, Hornbake Library

Children's Television Workshop Records

Interviews

Cooney, Joan Ganz. "Joan Ganz Cooney Interview." Interview by Shirley Wershba. *Television Academy Foundation,* April 22 and 27, 1998, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/joan-ganz-cooney?clip=43310#interview-clips.

Reports

Ball, Samuel., and Gerry Ann. Bogatz. *Research on Sesame Street: Some Implications for Compensatory Education*. Princeton, N.J: Educational Testing Service, 1972.

———. *The First Year of Sesame Street: An Evaluation; a Report to the Children's Television Workshop*. Princeton, N.J: Educational Testing Service, 1970.

Cooney, Joan Ganz. "The Potential Uses of Television for Preschool Education," 1966.

Newspapers

Boston Globe
Jackson Daily News
New York Times

Video Clips

Sesame Street. "Sesame Street: Nursing Babies." Produced by Sesame Street. Uploaded April 16, 2010. YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a9Xqu_c9Yo.

Sesame Street. "Sesame Street: Show Open Season 1." Produced by Sesame Street. Uploaded November 1, 2019. YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwio5qGg8o4.

Other Published Primary Sources

Davis, Adelle. *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970.

Lesser, Gerald. *Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street*. Random House, 1974.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Books, Essays, and Articles

Brunell, Laura, and Elinor Burkett. "Feminism." In *Encyclopedia Britannica.* 2024.

Chudacoff, Howard. *Children at Play: An American History*. New York University Press, 2007.

Counihan, Carole. *Food in the USA: A Reader.* Routledge, 2002.

Cross, Gary S. *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

Davis, Michael. *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street*. Viking, 2008.

Dow, Bonnie. *Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Edgerton, Gary, and Peter Rollins, eds. *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*. University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

Evans, Sara M. *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*. Free Press, 2004.

Fisch, Shalom M. *Children's Learning from Educational Television: Sesame Street and Beyond*. Erlbaum Associates, 2004.

Fisch, Shalom M., and Rosemarie T. Truglio. *"G" is for "Growing": Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*. Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

Haydu, Jeffrey. *Upsetting Food: Three Eras of Food Protest in the United States*. Temple University Press, 2021.

Hulbert, Ann. *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children.* Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Kempker, Erin. *Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland.* University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Kline, Stephen. *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in an Age of Marketing.* Verso Books, 1993.

Mazzarella, Sharon R., and Norma O. Pecora. *Growing up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*. Vol. 9. Peter Lang, 1999.

Meyerowitz, Joanne."Rewriting Postwar Women's History, 1945-1960." In *A Companion to American Women's History*, edited by Nancy A. Hewitt, 382-396. Blackwell, 2002.

Mittell, Jason. "The Great Saturday Morning Exile: Scheduling Cartoons on Television's Periphery in the 1960s." In *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture,* edited by Carol Stabile and Mark Harrison. Routledge, 2003.

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

Polsky, Richard M. *Getting to Sesame Street: Origins of the Children's Television Workshop*. Praeger, 1975.

Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America.* Viking, 2000.

Richardson, Evan. "Getting from Sesame Street to Sesamstrasse: The Development of Sesame Street's International Adaptations, 1970-1978." *Columbia Journal of History* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2022-23): 1-30.

Rymsza-Pawlowska, M. J. *History Comes Alive: Public History and Popular Culture in the 1970s*. University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Schreiber, Ronnee. *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics.* Oxford University Press, 2008.

Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. Free Press, 2001.

Spruill, Marjorie Julian. *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Taranto, Stacie. *Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Turk, Katherine. *The Women of NOW: How Feminists Built an Organization That Transformed America*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023.

Vinovskis, Maris A. *The Birth of Head Start: Preschool Education Policies in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Ward, Jule DeJager. *La Leche League at the Crossroads of Medicine, Feminism, and Religion.* University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Weiner, Lynne. "Reconstructing Motherhood: The La Leche League in Postwar America." *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 4 (1994): 1357-81.

Wolfarth, Joanna. *Milk: An Intimate History of Breastfeeding.* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2023.

Zigler, Edward, and Sally J. Styfco. *The Hidden History of Head Start.* Oxford University Press, 2010.

Zigler, Edward, and Susan Muenchow. *Head Start: The inside Story of America's Most Successful Educational Experiment*. BasicBooks, 1992.