

BNPower:

BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

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Open Sesame: Going behind the scenes of Sesame Street to understand narrative infrastructure

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Immortal. Aspirational. Bigger than ourselves. Those are a few of the words that Sesame Street's creators and viewers have used to describe the groundbreaking and almost universally beloved show — a program that illustrates what it means to build narrative power with stories that advance dignity and belonging.

When it debuted in November 1969, Sesame Street was the first educational TV program to compete with commercial shows for its audience. Its founders set out to give children the tools they needed to create the kind of world they want to live in. Before Sesame Street, what children learned from TV was of little value. "Every child in America was singing beer commercials," said Joan Cooney, the show's earliest visionary, in *Street Gang*, a documentary on Sesame Street's origins. She wondered: Could TV be used to educate, instead of just sell? Could commercial techniques be used to prepare kids for school and teach them important life lessons?

Over half a century later, we have ample evidence to prove what Cooney believed to be true all along, and the answer to her questions is a resounding "yes." Yes, TV can have social value. Yes, it can be used to hook children on the alphabet instead of alcohol. Yes, it can make learning fun, while helping children to navigate complex issues, like racial identity, death, and self-doubt.

Sesame Street — whose name derives from the phrase "open sesame," suggesting unrestricted access to a place where adventures can happen — transformed the television landscape and created educational opportunities for kids from all racial and socio-economic backgrounds. And while on its own, one show cannot dismantle the barriers to education that create racial inequities, it can be part of the narrative infrastructure that builds racial equity.

"At the kernel of our being, we're not sure what we are or what we can be," said music composer Joe Raposo. "We know there's potential and the realization to accept ourselves, to know that we can become something that perhaps we never dreamed we could be. That's what Sesame Street is about." The program's widespread appeal and success in shaping the worldview of entire generations of young people make it an excellent case example of how abstract concepts like narrative infrastructure and power manifest in real-world settings, like on the stage and in the writing room of this pioneering children's show.

The power to define what's true, to determine the story of the past and institutionalize ideas so they replicate, this is narrative power.

Sesame Street had all the components required to support an infrastructure that could build and reinforce progressive narratives, starting with well-defined goals and a clear target audience. The show's creators wanted to produce fun, entertaining, educational programming to help better prepare inner-city children, especially Black children, for kindergarten. The idea was to close the gap kids of color and low-income children faced when they started school while benefiting all youngsters.

"There is no question the people who control the system read, and the people who make it in the system read," Cooney said.

After conducting a four-month feasibility study in the mid-1960s, Cooney found that kids aged 3 to 5 watched TV one half of their waking time. The only larger category was sleep. If they're going to watch so much TV, she and show producers thought, why not find out what they like to watch and find out what would be good for them to watch, and then put the two together? That's exactly what they did, and Sesame Street was born.

Funded by the federal government, Sesame Street operated on a robust initial budget of \$8 million — that's roughly equivalent to \$60 million in 2022 — and had tremendous reach: More than 180 stations carried the show. As part of the Children's Television Workshop, Sesame Street writers collaborated with educators to create a curriculum that taught children their numbers and letters, part-whole relationships, and a range of other core concepts. At the same time, the diverse, mixed-race cast demonstrated values like community and inclusion and tackled important social concepts, showing that people from all backgrounds deserve respect; for example, the program portrayed blue-collar jobs like a bus driver with as much prestige as white-collar career paths like dentistry.

"When you're growing up and you don't see yourself in the media, then you get the feeling that you don't exist," said Sonia Manzano, who played Maria on the show. "And that's when you start feeling like you're not part of this society or this culture."

Sesame Street provided positive roles for Latinx and Black actors at a time when many acting roles, such as gang members, fueled negative stereotypes. The show not only embraced inclusion through its cast but also through its set. Modeled after a street in Harem, Sesame Street reflected the real-life energy one might find in an urban neighborhood, where the road itself acts as a playground of sorts.

To further build narrative infrastructure, Sesame Street's staff hired a community outreach worker named Evelyn Davis who contacted churches, schools, child care centers, and YMCAs to get the word out. Additionally, actors toured during their first year for Sesame Street Live, which actor Matt Robinson described as like "Woodstock for kids."

Even adults embraced the show. Sesame Street's musical guests, which included talents ranging from Loretta Lynn to James Taylor to Dizzy Gillespie, appealed to all ages. The show's large audience was also a credit to its writers, who often used satire and other forms of humor to engage older viewers. That tactic was as strategic as it was enjoyable: The producers knew from focus groups that children retained Sesame Street's lessons better if they could discuss what they were learning with a parent or guardian. Still, the show was not without opposition. It came of age during the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War, when the country was already deeply divided. In Mississippi, for example, some viewers disliked the number of Black performers on the show, and the Offices of the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television — a million-dollar public TV facility, located in a white, affluent suburb of Jackson — wouldn't carry Sesame Street until advocates forced the issue. Not all educators embraced it either; some thought the program was loud and overstimulating.

Despite such hurdles, Sesame Street quickly became a tremendous success. It's as if "the world had been waiting for it," Cooney said of its launch.

Sesame Street remains popular today, with another generation of children learning enumeration from The Count, contemplating race with songs like "It's Not Easy Being Green," gathering wisdom on how to deal with difficult people from Oscar the Grouch, and, in general, daring to dream.

“I may be small, but I am somebody. I can change the world. ...” Rev. Jesse Jackson once said before a crowd of tiny smiles on the show. “Beautiful children will grow up and make the whole world beautiful.” Decades later, that sentiment still rings true. And if Joan Cooney is right, the show’s core messages will endure 200 years from now. “It’s sort of a form of immortality,” she said. “Ernie will live forever.”