

## Brought To You by the Letters C, R, T, and C: *Sesame Street* and Canadian Nationalism

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Volume 27, numéro 1, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040526ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040526ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

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### Citer cet article

Hayday, M. (2016). Brought To You by the Letters C, R, T, and C: *Sesame Street* and Canadian Nationalism. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 27(1), 95–137.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1040526ar>

### Résumé de l'article

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# Brought To You by the Letters C, R, T, and C: *Sesame Street* and Canadian Nationalism

MATTHEW HAYDAY

## *Abstract*

*The wildly popular educational program Sesame Street arrived in Canada during a key transitional period for Canadian broadcasting policy in the early 1970s. An American-made program, it was threatened with cancellation by stations seeking to meet their Canadian content (CanCon) quotas with the least possible financial cost. A heated debate that included public protests and lobbying ensued, involving the Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the media, parliamentarians, parents and even children. Each group advanced their particular interests regarding the issue of Canadianizing television. Ultimately, the CBC provided a compromise solution with the Canadianization of Sesame Street, whereby a portion of the program's segments would be replaced by Canadian-made material that aimed to provide messages about Canada for young children. This tumultuous debate and its ultimate solution reveal the ambivalent attitudes held by Canadians, private broadcasters, and even the CBC about both the CRTC's Canadianization policies and the quantitative approaches used to meet its objectives. It also demonstrates the roles that activist groups and more established interests such as broadcasters have played in shaping Canadian broadcasting policy.*

## *Résumé*

*Le très populaire programme éducatif Sesame Street est arrivé au pays pendant une période charnière pour la politique canadienne de radiodiffusion au début des années 1970. De mouture américaine, ce programme fut menacé d'annulation par les stations cherchant à respecter les quotas sur le contenu canadien (Cancon), tout en endiguant le plus possible les coûts financiers. Un débat houleux animé par des manifestations populaires et des groupes de pression s'ensuivit, incluant le Conseil de la radiodiffusion et des télécommunications canadiennes (CRTC), la Société*

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“Bring Back Bert!” reads the giant sandwich board carried by pigtailed three-year-old Margot Irvine as she marches in front of the CKWS-TV station in Kingston, Ontario, on 18 September 1972. Together with about a dozen other preschoolers, bearing signs stating “Where is Ernie? I Miss Him” and “CKWS-TV Unfair to Kids,” Irvine was protesting the cancellation of Sesame Street by her local CBC-affiliated television station.<sup>1</sup>

This demonstration, organized by a group of mothers led by Dot Nuechterlein, was part of the latest wave of protests in Canadian communities determined to save *Sesame Street*, the wildly popular and innovative new children’s educational program, from being dropped from the local airwaves. The Kingston protest was a success. The following day, station program director Lorne Freed announced that *Sesame Street* would return.<sup>2</sup> The children were doubtless delighted that Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, and Bert and Ernie would return to their television screens, thanks to their precocious engagement with social activism.

The creation of Joan Ganz Cooney and her team at the Children’s Television Workshop (CTW), *Sesame Street* was hailed a breakthrough in educational television when it debuted in the late 1960s. It was based on the concept that educational television must recognize and accept the expectations that commercial television had created in its youngest viewers. Educational programs had to be lively, fast-moving, and dramatically presented, with slick and expensive production values, if they were to compete with commercial offerings.<sup>3</sup> *Sesame Street* followed a variety



Figure 1: Margot Irvine Leads the Pro-*Sesame Street* Protestors Outside CKWS-TV, Kingston. Source: Kingston Whig-Standard.

show-inspired format. “Street” scenes, set in an urban neighbourhood loosely based on Harlem, New York, provided the continuity for each one-hour episode, featuring a multiracial cast of adults and children who interacted with Jim Henson’s Muppet characters. A series of short segments, both animation and live action, ranging in length from a few seconds to a few minutes, were interspersed between the street scenes. *Sesame Street* focused on the cognitive development of preschool children, based on a formal curriculum developed by a team of psychologists and educational researchers who worked in tandem with experienced television producers. The entire process underwent extensive independent evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Although aiming to reach all children, *Sesame Street* was born in the era of the so-called “preschool movement” and President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and Head Start programs, and the producers believed that poverty

could be overcome through education. Poor, urban preschoolers were thus the primary targets of the show.<sup>5</sup>

To understand why the very popular *Sesame Street* was on the chopping block in 1972, we must consider the broader landscape of Canadian broadcasting in the early 1970s. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) acquired the rights to air the program in 1970, at the same time as the Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC) was rolling out new quotas for Canadian content in television. *Sesame Street* became one of the focal points in the ongoing debates over nationalism in broadcasting policy.

As Marc Raboy notes, three major themes have shaped debates about Canadian broadcasting: “national identity and national unity; tensions between public and private enterprise; [and] broadcasting as an instrument of social and cultural development.”<sup>6</sup> Until the early 1990s, it was largely taken as a given by Canadian television scholars that cultural and political sovereignty were linked. Broadcasting policy had mostly been shaped by the belief that Canadian television required protection, was beneficial for Canadians, and was crucial to the survival of the Canadian nation.<sup>7</sup> Richard Collins challenged the premise that Canada’s political sovereignty and distinctive identity depended on a protectionist broadcasting policy, arguing that such a policy was not necessary. Rather, he contended that Canada’s political stability, integrative capacity, and social peace stemmed from a weak (that is, non-prescriptive) national culture.<sup>8</sup> Following up on this theme, authors who contributed to David Flaherty and Frank Manning’s anthology, *The Beaver Bites Back*, complicated our understanding of how Canadians consume American mass culture, rejecting the received wisdom that Canadians passively accepted the values and messages conveyed by the mass media.<sup>9</sup>

The radical transformation of the television landscape since the 1970s, with the emergence of cable television, digital media, and a proliferation of new ways to access programming, has substantially altered the factors that shape the scholarly and public debates over whether and how to regulate Canadian broadcasting, and about the ways that Canadian television affects identity

formation.<sup>10</sup> These debates have often engaged with the question of whether regulating the quantity of Canadian television on the air will indeed lead to “quality” Canadian programming, or whether other mechanisms, such as direct funding, might better serve this objective.<sup>11</sup> However, in the early 1970s, debates that Raboy identified about cultural sovereignty, national identity formation, and the validity or necessity of state regulation of broadcasting content were central to the story of *Sesame Street* and its future in Canada.

The structure and governance of Canadian television were both in transition from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, and shaped these debates significantly. The Diefenbaker government decided to permit television competition in major markets (which led to the creation of the CTV network) and passed a new Broadcasting Act in 1958 that shifted responsibility for television regulation from the CBC to the Board of Broadcasting Governors (BBG). In 1959, the BBG proposed that a minimum amount of Canadian content (CanCon) be required on both the CBC and private stations. A 55 percent requirement was in effect as of April 1962.<sup>12</sup> Faced with concerns over the state of Canadian culture, Americanization, and a rising tide of Canadian nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>13</sup> the Liberal governments of Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau were pressed to adopt more protective legislation in the cultural sector. The Broadcasting Act of 1968 replaced the BBG with a new body, the Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC), which would both regulate television and radio, and have power over licensing decisions.<sup>14</sup> As will become clear, it was the first efforts of the CRTC to increase Canadian content on television in 1970 that spurred the crisis over *Sesame Street*.

Versions of the debate over the merits of Canadian content regulations have appeared in other cultural sectors, both before and since the *Sesame Street* case. The debate surrounding *Sesame Street* followed on the heels of the controversial decision by the Pearson government to exempt the Canadian editions of the American magazines *Time* and *Reader's Digest* from the protectionist provisions of the 1964 Paperback and Periodicals

Distributors Act (a loophole that was not closed until 1976).<sup>15</sup> Two decades later, the outcry that erupted when Bryan Adams' hit single "(Everything I Do) I Do It For You" was deemed not to be Canadian content for the purposes of radio airplay called the entire regulation system into question.<sup>16</sup> *Sesame Street* created similar challenges for promoters of Canadian content on television in the 1970s, although the debates were complicated by the fact that as an educational program, it was not a purely commercial product.

The furor over *Sesame Street* occurred in the midst of a period of amplified cultural nationalism and protectionist sentiment. This continued into debates over economic protectionism and new policies introduced in the early 1970s to limit American control of the Canadian economy.<sup>17</sup> The Canadian government was also in the early years of promoting a new approach to Canadian identity, rooted in ideas of official bilingualism and multiculturalism and new symbols, such as the Maple Leaf flag, which were still encountering resistance.<sup>18</sup> Television programming, some felt, could help reinforce national unity and this new identity. But while fostering nationalism and conceptions of national identity through the education system was common, and could appear in forms including textbooks and school-based activities on national days,<sup>19</sup> explicitly Canadian educational television was still relatively new territory, and is a field that has not received much scholarly attention to date.

Ultimately, champions of the program at the CBC came up with a solution to their dilemma: the Canadianization of *Sesame Street*. Between 1973 and 1987, English-Canadian viewers watched a modified version of the program that aired on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the United States. Over this fifteen-year span, before a full-blown Canadian *Sesame Street* with its own Muppets was launched, Canadian children saw a version with some of the American segments replaced by Canadian-produced ones, with an increasing proportion of Canadian content incorporated over the years. (French-Canadian viewers would have access to a dubbed, shortened version of the American content starting in 1975.) This strategy helped Canadian broadcasters meet their

Canadian content targets, as the CRTC allowed those minutes to count as Canadian, and also developed valuable expertise and created jobs in children's television production. Canadianization also allowed the producers to try to inculcate preschool-aged children with certain values about Canada.

This study of the Canadian version of *Sesame Street* allows for an exploration of the politics of nationalism and the regulation of broadcasting in Canada in the 1970s. The protests that erupted to protect the program unfolded in two phases. In the first, parents worked alongside broadcasters and their allies in Parliament and the media to oppose the CRTC regulations. In the second, parents struggled to keep *Sesame Street* on the air, advancing concerns about education and quality television against the financial arguments of the CBC affiliates. These protests reveal an ambivalent attitude towards the Canadianization imperatives of the federal government, particularly in relation to the issue of quality television broadcasting. An array of intersecting concerns, including access to early childhood education, accessibility of channels and programming, and the financial implications associated with implementing CanCon regulations shaped the dynamics between parents, private broadcasters, the CBC, and the CRTC.

The fact that the CBC ultimately opted for a Canadianized version of this American program as a solution to this conundrum, rather than producing stand-alone Canadian educational programming to take its place, likewise reveals some of the ambivalence at the CBC towards an orthodox approach to nationalism. The network was willing to compromise in the interest of saving money, but also to produce what they felt would be the best educational programming for Canadian children. But ambivalence, as Robert Wright observes, need not have the negative connotations of Canadians' being "fence sitters or apathetic victims of situational forces." In his work on Canadian nationalism, Wright argues that ambivalence has allowed Canadians to develop "remarkably sophisticated cultural and political strategies for deriving pleasure, prosperity and peace of mind out of conditions of contradiction, paradox and irony."<sup>20</sup> Canadianization was a way of reconciling Canadians' interest in maintaining



their own national culture, while simultaneously wanting to consume American cultural products and to adapt the best elements of that culture to serve Canadian objectives. The *Sesame Street* case reinforces Frank Manning's argument that Canadians have the capacity, while consuming American culture, to "reconstitute and recontextualize [it] in ways representative of what consciously, albeit ambivalently, distinguishes Canada from its powerful neighbour."<sup>21</sup> The actual content of the Canadianized version of *Sesame Street*, which will be discussed briefly, provides a lens into how Canadian television producers were translating the new 1970s versions of Canadian identity into educational messaging for children.

Both Canadian and international scholars have considered certain facets of the internationalization of *Sesame Street*. While historian Ryan Edwardson observes briefly that there was a Canadian version of the program, his work on Canadian content omits the connection between the new 1970s CRTC regulations and the development of Canadian *Sesame Street*.<sup>22</sup> Otherwise, the literature on the show's Canadian version has tended to focus on its utility for second-language teaching, with some early studies considering possible impacts on children's perception of race.<sup>23</sup> Richard Lewis, who served on *Sesame Street* Canada's educational advisory board in the 1980s and 1990s, published a few content analysis studies related to the program's structure and its depictions of regionalism in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> But the questions of the origins of the program, the dynamics of its production, and the vision of Canada held by its producers have not yet been probed. As Natalie Coulter recently observed, this is unfortunately typical of the broader topic of the history of Canadian children's media and the political economy of its production and distribution, which have largely gone unstudied. Coulter acknowledges that research in this area has been limited partly due to the lack of archival resources — a problem that has also been noted by Michele Byers and Jennifer Vanderburgh<sup>25</sup> — while also stressing the importance of this research for enriching our understanding of Canada's national history and the significance within it of Canadian media. Programming for children was an explicit part

of the CBC's mandate, and yet we know little about how this was carried out, and what guided the actions of decision makers.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly surprising given that Canada became a major global exporter of child-oriented media.

There are multiple points of comparison for how the Canadian adaptation of *Sesame Street* played out as a form of internationalization.<sup>27</sup> Gregory Gettas observes that state-run broadcasters were often key to the program's diffusion, as they tended to have an interest in national values being conveyed via broadcasting, and a mandate to consider children. But each country had distinctive goals and educational structures, which shaped the forms that internationalization did — or did not — take. Canada and West Germany initially proceeded with substituted inserts, while Mexico, right from the outset, developed its own street for its *Plaza Sésamo*.<sup>28</sup> Some national broadcasters objected to the methodology of *Sesame Street*, with the BBC's Monica Sims in particular considering it too authoritarian, and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's Children's and Youth Department considering it insufficiently child-centric.<sup>29</sup> That Canada, despite fears of Americanization, nevertheless adopted (and then adapted) *Sesame Street* speaks to the ambivalent nature of Canadian nationalisms and cultural politics of this period.

This article focuses on the early years of *Sesame Street* in Canada, from 1970 to 1973. This period spans both the initial acquisition of the program and two heated rounds of public protest and debate surrounding its potential cancellation. It also covers the development and launch of the Canadian segments on *Sesame Street*, including how negotiations between the CBC and the CTW unfolded, the content- and identity-oriented objectives of the producers, and the initial reception of these segments by the Canadian public. A fuller exploration of how this Canadian content evolved in the longer term, including the proposals for a more fully Canadian version, will be the subject of future publications.

Significant methodological challenges shaped this project, particularly the fact that it was not possible to view the segments produced during this period because the original videotapes were not conserved. This is unfortunately typical of much television

programming produced in this era. Similarly, while oral histories might have supplemented this project, many of the key individuals have passed away. It was, however, possible to reconstruct the objectives that producers had in mind based on archival materials conserved by the CBC and the CTW.<sup>30</sup> Some reconstruction of the content of individual segments was possible based on a limited number of production-related documents, newspaper articles reviewing the program, and materials retained from consultations with the team of pedagogical experts who reviewed these segments.

### Acquiring *Sesame Street* for Canada

*Sesame Street* debuted on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the United States on 10 November 1969 and quickly attracted a wide audience. The show's popularity rapidly reached the ears of Knowlton Nash, Director of Information Programs for the CBC. Nash approached Robert (Bob) Davidson of the Children's Television Workshop in January 1970, and made an offer to acquire the Canadian rights to *Sesame Street*.<sup>31</sup> His proposal was for 52 episodes of the show, with the intent to schedule one episode per week, at a cost of \$80,600. At a meeting in New York, the CBC's representatives got their first taste of the hardball negotiations and firm control over *Sesame Street* that would characterize the approach of the CTW team. In addition to seeking more money, citing a possible competing bid from the CTV network, they were very adamant about the "stripping" concept of the show, which meant airing it every weekday in the same time slot.<sup>32</sup>

News of the negotiations leaked out. In the House of Commons, NDP member of Parliament Mark Rose asked Secretary of State Gérard Pelletier if the CBC was planning to acquire *Sesame Street*, and was told that this was the case.<sup>33</sup> As negotiations continued, the CBC sweetened its financial bid and appealed to the CTW's desire for maximum exposure by noting that between its 12 owned stations and 32 affiliated stations, it could reach 97 percent of the Canadian audience, as opposed to the 11 major market stations owned by CTV.<sup>34</sup> The CBC also agreed to the

stripping concept, and to the provision that the program would air without commercials. If *Sesame Street* were to come to Canada, it would be on CTW's terms: five one-hour shows per week, in the same time slot, completely commercial-free. By mid-March, an agreement in principle was reached under which the CBC would pay \$250,000 for the season.<sup>35</sup>

The issue of airing *Sesame Street* commercial-free was rapidly becoming more significant. The CRTC released proposals on 12 February 1970 to increase the requirements for Canadian content on television from 55 to 60 percent.<sup>36</sup> This led to debate within the CBC as to whether it was advisable to continue pursuing the *Sesame Street* negotiations. The decision was made to proceed because Knowlton Nash was advised by Harry Boyle, Vice-Chair of the CRTC, that there was a very good chance that *Sesame Street* — despite being an American production — would be given a 100 percent Canadian content classification!<sup>37</sup> Why he thought this was possible is somewhat curious, although the BBG had permitted British- and French-produced content to be treated as Canadian, and exempted productions of international significance, so perhaps Boyle was thinking in a similar vein.<sup>38</sup>

In June, the CBC sought a written guarantee that *Sesame Street* would at least be treated as “neutral” content.<sup>39</sup> The CRTC granted verbal assurances that the program would not be treated as American content for the 1970–71 programming year, but stated that this was a one-time exception because of the promises made prior to the hearings.<sup>40</sup> It shied away from any language relating to a “neutral” classification, as this concept had been rejected in hearings held on its proposals in April. The CRTC confirmed this position in July, writing that “the CBC may exceed the 30 per cent limit on U.S. programmes covering the next year providing that the excess is entirely due to ‘Sesame Street.’”<sup>41</sup> It was a short-term reprieve, but one that raised the question of what would happen when the program came up for renewal.

The CRTC remained concerned about how *Sesame Street* might factor into its new guidelines for Canadian content. CRTC Chair Pierre Juneau wrote to CBC President George Davidson to express concern about how the affiliate stations continued to refer

to the idea of “neutral” content. The CBC affiliates had sided with the Canadian Association of Broadcasters in strenuously opposing the new requirements at the April hearings, a position that aligned them with Progressive Conservative party critics.<sup>42</sup> It also reflected the majority position in English-speaking Canada. A 1970 Gallup Poll showed that although nation-wide the new requirements had the support of 47 percent of Canadians, while being opposed by 42 percent, the split among English-speakers was 39-53.<sup>43</sup> Although Juneau was “desirous that ‘Sesame Street’ receive wide distribution,” he worried that the show might become a tool for stations to evade content requirements.<sup>44</sup> The larger problem, as it would unfold, was how strongly Canadian parents wanted to keep this American-made program on the air, and thus could be enlisted as allies in the affiliates’ fight against higher CanCon requirements.

### Canadians Embrace *Sesame Street*, but Does it Have a Future?

*Sesame Street* started airing in Canada at the end of September 1970. For most Canadians, the show was accessible through the 12 CBC-owned stations and its 32 affiliated stations, all of which took advantage of the option to air the show.<sup>45</sup> The Canadian stations aired season one of *Sesame Street*, which had already aired the previous year in the United States. For Canadians with access to cable TV, season two could also be accessed on American PBS channels.<sup>46</sup>

Canadians were quick to praise the program. In its first week on the air, Bob Shiels of the *Calgary Herald* raved about the “fast-paced hour” that featured “Jim Henson’s incredible Muppets, imaginative (and funny) animation, music, stories and short films.”<sup>47</sup> Ian MacDonald of the *Montreal Gazette* dubbed it the “finest hour in children’s programming,” noting that teacher guides were available to supplement its educational value.<sup>48</sup> Seven weeks in, Patrick Scott of the *Toronto Star* observed that the CBC had been flooded with overwhelmingly positive mail from parents and grandparents enjoying the show from coast to coast, and that 10,000 viewers had already written in to request

CTW's educational guides.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, *Sesame Street*'s success did not stop at the border.

Alongside the enthusiasm, there were musings about what the future might hold for the show in Canada. Journalists noted that the program had "a predominantly black cast with US accents, and a reference to 'cows all over America'."<sup>50</sup> Brownstone houses, emblematic of the inner city New York set, did not exist in any Canadian city.<sup>51</sup> Within the CBC, Dan McCarthy, head of the schools and youth department, was already thinking towards a Canadian future for the show. He mused that in the future it could perhaps be "re-packaged" to show "Indian reservations [sic] and reflect Canadian bilingualism." However, while McCarthy might have loved to produce an entirely Canadian production, the \$8 million per season budget of *Sesame Street* was far beyond the reach of any Canadian network.<sup>52</sup> As with dramatic programming, quality Canadian educational television came with a steep price tag.

McCarthy had been contemplating a Canadianized version of the show since the start of negotiations with the CTW. He suggested "it would be a great coup if we could purchase the right to use material from it (*Sesame Street*) and re-package, giving it a slightly more Canadian slant."<sup>53</sup> He later noted, "the fact that it is specifically designed for American youngsters in urban ghettos where racism is a part of the environment, means it is not ideally suited to the viewing needs of Canadian children," displaying some middle-class ignorance of racial and class issues in Canada.<sup>54</sup> Shortly after the CBC launch of *Sesame Street*, McCarthy was pressing his superiors to push CTW officials about the idea of a Canadian adaptation. He noted that a re-packaged show might be able to get at least a 50 percent Canadian content classification.<sup>55</sup> McCarthy's efforts would be pursued in the background as a long-term project, but a shorter term crisis lay ahead.

### Protesting Against CanCon Regulations: The First Wave

The CRTC's new regulations on foreign content on television encountered extensive resistance from the CBC-affiliated and

other Canadian television stations in their first year, and *Sesame Street* played a key role in these debates about broadcasting policy. A combination of parental and station pressure ultimately delayed the full implementation of significantly increased Canadian content, and forced modifications to the policy.

The first warning alarms about *Sesame Street*'s future were sounded in Calgary, Alberta. Unlike most major Canadian cities, Calgary did not have its own CBC-owned station; *Sesame Street* was carried on the local CBC-affiliated station, CHCT, channel 2. In January 1971, the station signaled that if the CRTC insisted on its planned increase in Canadian content for the affiliated stations from 55 to 60 percent for the following broadcast year, and treated *Sesame Street* as American content, CHCT would be forced to drop the program. It was deemed too expensive to lose five hours a week that could otherwise be filled by more lucrative American programming where commercials could be aired.

Calgarians were alerted to the potential loss of the show by columnists Shirlee Gordon in the *Albertan* and Bob Shiels in the *Calgary Herald*, who set their sights on the CRTC as the villain.<sup>56</sup> Shiels argued for the continuation of the so-called "neutral" status granted to *Sesame Street*. While admitting that it was not the CRTC that decided if *Sesame Street* itself would be carried by any given station, he observed that the Commission laid down the rules around content regulations that shaped the television landscape. Shiels urged his readers to write to the CRTC to exert public pressure. Gordon noted that the Calgary Public School Board had passed a motion with the backing of the Alberta School Trustees Association and CARET (the new Calgary educational television station) to petition the CRTC on the issue of the status of *Sesame Street*. Wendell Wilks, operations manager for CHCT, warned the CBC head office that the affiliate stations wanted the central CBC to intervene on their behalf with the CRTC. Failing that, they would be taking this issue directly to their MPs.<sup>57</sup>

Pressure to defend *Sesame Street* escalated rapidly. Alberta Department of Education representative Dick Morton forwarded a petition to Knowlton Nash signed by Calgary mothers

concerned about the possibility of losing *Sesame Street*.<sup>58</sup> Morton claimed that he had “interviewed a number of young ladies who had seen the program and who said they were going to conceive children as soon as possible so that their children could watch Sesame.” Nash’s inquiries in other cities suggested that there would be a “revolution” if the program were dropped. Norn Garriock, managing director of television, noted that *Sesame Street* had “reached extreme interest levels.” Private affiliates had decided that this was the issue “on which to do battle with the CRTC re: Canadian content.”<sup>59</sup>

Shirlee Gordon stayed riveted to the *Sesame Street* issue. She had been receiving cards, letters, and phone calls from her readers, and so decided to approach the CRTC directly. When she asked the CRTC rep what to do about *Sesame Street*, she was told “Write, bombard us. Every letter is read carefully. In many cases Xerox copies are distributed to executives and circulated where it counts.”<sup>60</sup> Gordon relayed this advice to her readers. One wonders who the CRTC official was who invited this deluge of public pressure. Bob Shiels echoed Gordon’s calls for pressure on the CRTC, observing that he considered the entire concept of Canadian content regulation to be wrong-headed.<sup>61</sup>

The Calgary columnists prompted a mass of letters to the CRTC, many arguing that the Commission was directly preventing *Sesame Street* from being aired. While the CRTC replied with form letters explaining the technicalities of the regulations, pressure continued to mount.<sup>62</sup> One of the more unusual forms of protest was supported by The Bay, the nation-wide department store chain. Their Calgary store launched a publicity campaign in favour of *Sesame Street* in the form of a contest. Viewers of the show were invited to fill in response cards. The best written statement in response to “It is my opinion that Sesame Street [should/should not] continue on Calgary television because ...” would win the prize, a Ladies Dumai watch valued at \$169.99, in this highly gendered competition.

Entries were judged by Shirlee Gordon and Bob Shiels, and the responses were forwarded to the CRTC with a cover letter noting that only one entrant opposed keeping the show, against



673 who favoured maintaining *Sesame Street*. Winning entrant Mrs. M. (Florence) Charlton of the Highland Day Nursery wrote that “being in charge of 30 preschool children I know the impact it is having on them. It is simply tremendous. . . . To lose this program would be to lose the best thing television has ever presented to children.”<sup>63</sup> She observed that her charges were “watching, listening and virtually living on Sesame Street” and that when they entered elementary school they would “reap the harvest from the seeds of knowledge and tolerance being sown.”<sup>64</sup>

CBC Vice President Eugene Hallman observed that *Sesame Street* posed a massive public relations problem, and that “my instincts tell me that we would be stupid and misdirected if we were to drop the series at this time.”<sup>65</sup> In early 1971, the CBC-owned stations were already meeting their 60 percent Canadian content regulation quota, even with *Sesame Street*.<sup>66</sup> The question was whether the network would intervene on the side of the affiliates to press for a reduction of the Canadian content requirements.<sup>67</sup> There was a greater problem with the additional CRTC rule that no more than 30 percent of CBC television content (35 percent for the affiliates) could come from a single country other than Canada. *Sesame Street* pushed the CBC up to 31.5 percent from the United States. CBC management opted not to support the request to reduce CRTC CanCon requirements to 55 percent, but it would go to bat for going over the allowable 30 percent US content percentage “because it wished to bring to Canadian viewers a first-class educational feature.”<sup>68</sup>

By mid-February 1971, the CRTC had received over 8,000 letters from Calgary residents alone about *Sesame Street*,<sup>69</sup> and the issue was spreading to the House of Commons. Patrick Mahoney, the Liberal MP for Calgary South, wrote to both CRTC Chair Pierre Juneau and CBC President George Davidson to find out whether the CBC would intervene on the *Sesame Street* question with the CRTC to grant a further year’s extension.<sup>70</sup> Progressive Conservative MP Paul Yewchuk, member for Athabaska, was more confrontational, accusing Secretary of State Gérard Pelletier’s department of threatening “to withdraw from Canada one of the finest educational tools ever devised for the purpose of

teaching young children.”<sup>71</sup> Yewchuk noted that “all across the country petitions are being presented with the idea of trying to encourage the government to see the value of such a program and not to be so narrow-minded in its view of nationalism as to classify the program non-Canadian and threaten to remove it from the view of Canadian children.” Robert Fairweather, the PC member for Fundy-Royal (NB), asked whether non-import status could be granted to *Sesame Street*, and other “programs of international renown without being subject to the Canadian content rule.”<sup>72</sup> Pelletier largely attempted to deflect these questions, noting that final decisions had not been made, and repeating CRTC boiler-plate language about what had been decided for 1970–71. However, these questions were all feeding into a discourse of quality and educational value that was being used to challenge the CRTC regulations as parochial and failing to improve television broadcasting.

Meanwhile, other interest groups were getting involved. The Calgary chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada launched a bumper sticker campaign, printing 4,000 stickers reading “SOS Save Sesame Street.”<sup>73</sup> The campaign went national, with the Montréal chapter pressing the CBC for a more vocal defence of provisions to allow affiliates to carry *Sesame Street*.<sup>74</sup> The SOS campaign enlisted support from Calgary’s Catholic Women’s League, the Calgary local of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, the Local Council of Women, the YWCA, the University Women’s Club, the Junior League, and the Council of Home and School Associations.<sup>75</sup> The Alberta School Trustees’ Association brought the Canadian School Trustees’ Association onside in a two-pronged campaign aimed at both the CBC and the CRTC.<sup>76</sup>

Newspapers across the country began covering the threat of other affiliates’ dropping *Sesame Street*. Letters and petitions from parents in communities such as Regina, Moncton, and Sydney clamoured for the program to be maintained.<sup>77</sup> Children were enlisted as well. The CBC received a letter from “Tommy” and his classmates in Sydney that read: “Dear Secame [sic] St, I want your show to stay on the air, I watch Secame ST., We learn a little bit each day. All the people at school want your show to stay

on the air. From Tommy.”<sup>78</sup> Mrs. Burns McIntyre of Avonmore, Ontario, pleaded for the preservation of the show: “Dear Sirs: Take everything else off the air but PLEASE KEEP ‘SESAME STREET.’ Absolutely nothing could replace it.”<sup>79</sup> In rural communities without kindergarten, *Sesame Street* was seen as a needed preparation for school. Mrs. William Orton of Kamloops, BC, observed, “With the new open aura system of our schools the 5 yr olds need some base learning of numbers and letters and their sounds of which Sesame Street provides, as the teachers do not have individual teaching of the children who do not catch on to these fundamentals quickly.”<sup>80</sup>

On 17 March 1971, the CRTC buckled to the *Sesame Street* campaign. In a press release loaded with caveats, including that decisions about whether to air specific programs rested with individual broadcasters, it granted a *Sesame Street* exemption. “The Commission, having studied the views expressed by private affiliates of the CBC, is prepared for the programme year starting in the Fall of 1971, to authorize these affiliates to exceed the percentage of programmes imported from the United States — namely 35 per cent — if this is caused by the showing of Sesame Street.”<sup>81</sup>

A humorous *Financial Post* editorial proclaimed that “Big Bird will be back next year” and that “there will not be a parent-and-child uprising against all authority in 1971. The kiddiecars will not storm the Parliament buildings. Pierre Juneau and his fellow CRTC commissioners will not live in daily fear of being run out of town tarred and feathered with peanut butter and jelly.”<sup>82</sup> Although Knowlton Nash was pleased by the decision, he feared that all the publicity would give the CTW a stronger hand in renewal negotiations. Ultimately, the CTW took advantage of the brouhaha to extract \$280,000 US from the CBC for the 1971–72 renewal, up \$50,000 from the previous year.<sup>83</sup>

## Cancellation Protests, Round Two

The CRTC decision bought the affiliates another year, but really only postponed the *Sesame Street* issue. The CBC decided to work actively on a longer-term solution to its CanCon problem — the

Canadianization of the program, which will be addressed in the next section. But first another round of conflict erupted. By May 1972, there were warning signs that the CBC-affiliated stations planned to drop *Sesame Street* for the 1972–73 season because of the Canadian content issue.<sup>84</sup> In September, about half of the CBC affiliates did so, including the stations in Red Deer, London, Barrie, Prince Albert, Calgary, Wingham, Peterborough, Kingston, Windsor, Thunder Bay, Campbellton, Victoria, Timmins, Sudbury, North Bay, Saint John, and Lethbridge.<sup>85</sup> The second phase of *Sesame Street*-related protests that ensued would pit parents against these CBC affiliates, winning victories in some communities through their own actions, and in others when CBC's plan to Canadianize the program allowed for a compromise solution.

In late September 1972, the CRTC issued a statement indicating its resolve to maintain its regulations increasing private broadcasters' Canadian content requirements from 55 percent to 60 percent of airtime between 6 AM and midnight. While sympathetic to the irritation of parents whose children would no longer be able to see *Sesame Street*, the stations that dropped the program had done so of their own choice, and not because of an explicit order from the Commission. Moreover, the CRTC stressed that it had dropped the requirement that 5 percent of non-Canadian content come from a source other than the US, reiterating "there is ample opportunity for a station to schedule *Sesame Street* within the 40% foreign program rule if it chooses to do so."<sup>86</sup>

The cancellations and ensuing protests played out in a variety of ways, subject to local circumstances. In Saint John, New Brunswick CHSJ-TV announced on 1 September 1972 that it would no longer carry *Sesame Street*. The station's management, somewhat disingenuously, claimed that advertising revenue was not the issue, because the program aired in a time period where this revenue was negligible.<sup>87</sup> (Keeping *Sesame Street*, however, would mean cancelling American programs that aired in more lucrative time slots.) Local parents did not take the issue lying down. Carole Joan Ward, who spoke to the station and was told that no amount of signatures on a petition would make a dif-

ference, was not dissuaded. She believed a majority of viewers wanted the program back, and could not believe that CHSJ would “deliberately turn a deaf ear to its viewers when we are objecting to the removal of one particular program.”<sup>88</sup>

Saint John parents mobilized a Save Sesame Street Committee, headed by Lynn Barry. They lined up high-profile allies, including New Brunswick Minister of Education Lorne McGuigan, who sent a telegram to the CRTC asking for a Canadian rating for the program.<sup>89</sup> Saint John mayor Robert Lockhart met with CRTC Chair Pierre Juneau and, backed by a motion from the city’s Common Council, delivered a petition of 15,000 names collected by Barry and two other mothers.<sup>90</sup> Fundy Royal MP Gordon Fairweather backed the parents in their pleas. The Save Sesame Street Committee buttonholed Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau during an election campaign stop in the Maritimes in October 1972 to present a copy of their petition.<sup>91</sup> The Saint John station announced shortly thereafter that it would return to carrying the program on 15 January 1973.<sup>92</sup>

Protests over the cancellation of *Sesame Street* played out in various ways in other Canadian communities. The decision of the London, Wingham, and Windsor stations to cancel the show led to widespread protest in southwestern Ontario, including a motion from the Elgin County Board of Education.<sup>93</sup> CFPL-TV station manager Cliff Wingrove, of the London station, expressed surprise “that so many people would put such emphasis on one TV show, including the press.” He objected to being treated as a villain, when his station aired 8–11 hours per week of unsponsored children’s programming. From his perspective, the five hours of *Sesame Street* occupied an excessively large chunk of his US quota, and he needed to be able to offer higher calibre US programming in the prime time window to compete with two cable companies carrying American stations.<sup>94</sup> CFPL would hold out until the winter before reinstating *Sesame Street*.

A similar scenario played out in the fall of 1972 in southern Alberta, where Lethbridge and Calgary residents submitted petitions to their local stations to get *Sesame Street* reinstated.<sup>95</sup> The Calgary situation continued to be connected to the larger issue

of a desire for a local CBC-owned station. A Citizens' Committee for Sesame Street mobilized in local shopping centres to push for the return of the show.<sup>96</sup> By early December, over 10,000 signatures had been collected.<sup>97</sup> The response of the station managers was remarkably rude and gendered, with the Lethbridge station claiming that it couldn't keep track of the phone calls, "most of them rude and hysterical." The Calgary station manager claimed that mothers saw *Sesame Street* as a babysitting service. For parents in southern Alberta, however, this was seen as a rural issue, since cable television was unavailable, which was the only other way to access the show.<sup>98</sup> However, by January, both stations announced they would resume carrying the program.<sup>99</sup>

In these Ontario and Alberta cases, there was active mobilization by parents to secure the return of *Sesame Street*, but the local stations did not change their policies until it had been announced that a "Canadianized" version of *Sesame Street* was in the works for the winter, as will be discussed below. The Canadian version would qualify as 30 minutes of Canadian content per week (or 1/10 Canadian content). However, this represented a victory for the parent groups and their allies, as *Sesame Street* would still count for four and a half hours of US content. More complete victories were won in the Kingston case, discussed in the introduction, where the station manager backed down completely when faced with children picketing his station. Barrie's CKVR likewise bowed to parental pressure and reinstated *Sesame* when a petition bearing over 2,000 names was presented at its studios in October 1972.<sup>100</sup> *Globe and Mail* columnist Blaik Kirby was astonished by the success of these campaigns. When the show was cancelled, he had opined that boycott threats were "an utterly hopeless appeal."<sup>101</sup> After the Kingston victory, he observed that success was due to pressure "from individual mothers. The breaking point appears to have come when the station was picketed."<sup>102</sup> He attributed the Barrie victory to Mrs. A. Van Der Muelen, who charged that dropping *Sesame* was discriminating against rural viewers who had no access to cable TV.<sup>103</sup> There was a financial cost to these decisions. CKWS-TV manager Lorne Freed of Kingston estimated the lost revenue, due to

carrying *Sesame Street* in lieu of more lucrative American content, amounted to between \$25–\$50,000 over the past two seasons. CKVR estimated the total cost at about \$30,000 per year. These 1972 protests demonstrate the potential for citizen agency in shaping how Canadian broadcasters, including the CBC, would implement Canadian content regulations. In many communities the protesters were helped by the CBC's desire to protect and adapt this particular US-made program, as will be discussed below.

### A Canadian *Sesame Street*?

During the first two years of *Sesame Street*'s Canadian run, the CBC was working on a longer-term solution to the Canadian content problem. In November 1970, Knowlton Nash spoke with Michael (Mike) Dann of the Children's Television Workshop to broach the idea of creating a Canadian version of the program. At this point, Dann's main goal was to create international versions of *Sesame Street* in other languages, and he had been pursuing this with partners in Mexico, Brazil, and Germany. Less keen on an English-language Canadian version, Dann raised the possibility of a French version of the show to be produced by Radio-Canada. A Montréal-based production was likely to cost about one million dollars to adapt a 130-episode season.<sup>104</sup>

Although there were discussions about a French-Canadian adaptation in 1970, Radio-Canada decided not to pursue this.<sup>105</sup> The French-Canadian network also declined to carry the Paris-produced *Bonjour Sesame*, which they felt was too France-oriented for Canadian audiences. It would be another five years before a Montréal French-dubbed version of the program would come to Canada as *Sesame*, consisting of half an hour of segments produced in the United States. *Sesame* excluded segments set on the "Street" itself, but did include the Muppets Ernest (Ernie), Blaise (Bert), Gustave (Grover), and Croque-Croque (Cookie Monster).<sup>106</sup>

Dann did not completely close the door on the possibility of "providing a strictly Canadian segment into the English ver-

sion of Sesame of five or ten minutes.”<sup>107</sup> Dan McCarthy thought the English-Canadian segments concept was a good idea, but was aware that the CBC would need expanded production units and additional studio and production facility time if it were to match the high American production values. As such, this venture would have to carry a “deep freeze label” until a new deal was practicable for the children’s television division.<sup>108</sup> The deep freeze status proved brief in duration, as public pressures and CRTC constraints made this option seem very attractive within a year.

In the fall of 1971, although praise continued to be showered on *Sesame Street*, Canadian commentators and parents raised the issue of its American nature. Writing to the *Toronto Telegram*, Patricia Green noted that there were pronunciation differences in this “definitely American” program, and wondered if the format could be adapted for Canadian children. She mused that “the method of teaching letters and numbers could be done bilingually, could it not?” asking “Why wait until they are in school and too old to completely absorb a second language?”<sup>109</sup> It was a timely question, since the third season airing in the United States had introduced the Puerto Rican character “Maria” and started including Spanish-language segments. A *Toronto Daily Star* editorialist wrote that in the US “the racial motif . . . introduces kids to friendly, likeable adults, black and white. But the black-white bag is not Canada’s. English-French interplay is” and opined that if the Spanish content were strengthened, it would further remove the show from Canadian audiences.<sup>110</sup> The current Canadian alternative, however, was the Ontario Educational Communications Authority’s (the forerunner of TVOntario) *Polka Dot Door*, which claimed to be the Canadian answer to *Sesame Street* “without the educational hard sell.” The *Star*’s editorialist believed that the hard sell was part of the success, and that “adults playing milksop ring-around-the-rosie with rag dolls . . . is a pale substitute indeed.” Although costly, “if ever the CBC wished to perform a public service and try to help keep the nation together, a Canadian Sesame Street is the golden opportunity.”



This proposal lined up nicely with Dan McCarthy’s thinking. In September 1971, he scoped out a possible four-to-five year vision for the future of *Sesame Street* and children’s programming. He proposed using it as an agent of political socialization: “If the CBC really cares about the future of the Canadian nation, and its mandate indicates that it must, then it will set a high priority during the next five years on planning and producing more top quality programming designed to assist its most ardent, faithful and impressionable viewers to realize more of their boundless potential as individual persons and, ultimately, as members of a democratic society.”<sup>111</sup>

McCarthy believed that there was the talent available for a long-term goal of a Canadian version of the show by 1974–75, if money and planning resources could be devoted to it. He wanted to maintain the core *Sesame Street* formula, but moved to Canada, perhaps renamed as “Mercier, or Champlain, or Cartier Street.”<sup>112</sup> Some co-production with the CTW would be needed for the first two years in order to learn how to maintain the continuity elements of the program (the street segments) and incorporate the strongest elements of the American program — the animated segments and Jim Henson’s Muppets.<sup>113</sup>

This would start with Canadian inserts in 1972–73, replacing the Spanish material, followed by a 50–50 Canada-US co-production in 1973–74, and then a full hour Canadian-made program by 1974–75. It would entail extensive collaboration: with the National Film Board for production of animated segments; with English CBC producers for live footage; with the Canadian Council on Children and Youth and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) for research; and with the provinces for curriculum design, via the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Given the massive prospective costs, this would also involve approaching the federal Secretary of State and Treasury Board.

By October 1971, the mood at CTW had changed thanks to the début of *Plaza Sésamo* in Mexico (and the potential revenues

to be gained from international licensing, with new budgetary pressures on the Workshop). Knowlton Nash re-broached the idea of adding Canadian inserts to *Sesame Street*, with Mike Dann. His “versioning” idea met with some openness.<sup>114</sup> Nash also held preliminary discussions with possible partners in Canada. The Department of Indian Affairs was open to some financial support.<sup>115</sup> Ed Schreyer, Manitoba’s NDP Premier, was also quite interested, particularly if it was to include material on “Indian and Eskimo [sic] children.”<sup>116</sup> The National Film Board’s animation department expressed interest in working on animated segments; many of its team were already moonlighting on the CTW’s newest venture, “*The Electric Company*.”<sup>117</sup>

What would a Canadianized *Sesame Street* include? Nash and his potential partners brainstormed about the “portray[al of] the many broad cultural influences in Canada, including the Indian, Eskimo, Ukrainian, etc.” and bilingualism-oriented goals such as to “teach the 3–5 year olds how to say “Good morning” in French and other very simple, very basic French words.”<sup>118</sup> Regionalism featured into their vision, including filmstrips showing trips to Eastern and Western Canada and the North, and possibly the incorporation of Canadian celebrities such as Anne Murray and Wayne and Shuster. Nash stressed that if the CBC wanted to be able to include these segments by the 1972–73 season, production would need to start by January 1972, pointing to the beneficial “impact this would have on our Canadian content situation in regard to the CRTC regulations.”

There was caution at higher levels in the CBC. Eugene Hallman was convinced that there was nothing but trouble ahead with the Canadianization of *Sesame Street*, because of “too many cooks” working on this particular broth. He was wary of the CTW people, who had been extremely particular in the past about how their program could be adjusted, and concerned that McCarthy’s team was low-balling the potential cost of this project.<sup>119</sup> While not killing the idea of the Canadian version altogether, Hallman injected a blast of caution and wariness into the proceedings, which ultimately proved rather prescient.

CBC representatives had a lengthy meeting with Mike Dann about Canadianization in December 1971. Dann made it clear that the inserts must be educationally appropriate and of the same high quality as those produced by the CTW. The CBC would need to assemble a team of educational experts to advise the producers and vet the completed segments, with the CTW also signing off on these materials.<sup>120</sup> As the financial situation became clearer, Nash and McCarthy scaled back their first-year objective to five minutes of Canadian content per show, which entailed creating 200 minutes of original material that could be repeated multiple times across a 130-episode season. They established a target launch date of January 1973.

In March, CBC's representatives approached OISE about pulling together a Canadian educational advisory board to identify priorities, such as whether language training would be the most valuable objective of the inserts.<sup>121</sup> This board could also consider key Canadian questions such as "Should the CBC substitute for all the CTW-produced letter 'Z' training, or is the pronunciation difference really important?"<sup>122</sup> A curriculum group, initially headed by Dr. Les McLean, was assembled to devise recommendations for types of Canadian segments, including "How People Live".<sup>123</sup>

A few key issues remained in the CBC-CTW negotiations. For instance, the CTW was adamant that no new puppets be created for the Canadian version; only Jim Henson's Muppets could appear on the show.<sup>124</sup> There was also resistance to allowing the removal of anything other than the Spanish-language segments. But by mid-July 1972, an agreement in principle was reached. The Canadians could start working on inserts, aiming for five-to-seven minutes per program, as part of an overall renewal contract in which the CBC would pay CTW \$295,000 for a third season of *Sesame Street*.

### Producing and Canadianizing *Sesame Street*

Through the fall of 1972, the CBC production team was hard at work preparing Canadian inserts. They expected a viewership

of about 750,000 children. In addition to the possible benefits of Canadianization in terms of training Canadian animators, producers, and other professionals, Dan McCarthy and Sesame Street Canada's executive producer Perry Rosemond believed it would "contribute to the fulfillment of the CBC's mandate on the point of 'development of national unity and providing for a continuing expression of Canadian identity,' for the very young and extremely impressionable 3 to 5 year old Canadians."<sup>125</sup>

McCarthy and Rosemond laid out seven objectives for the Canadian inserts. In addition to the CTW's goals regarding literacy, etc., they sought:

- To remove Spanish language content and other material of less value to Canadian audiences from as much ... of "Sesame Street" as is feasible.
- To replace the Spanish content and segments with content of a distinctively Canadian flavour and character.
- To make the Canadian segments appealing in an entertainment sense and effective in an informative and educational sense to children between the ages of 3 to 5 years of age, the specific age appeal of "Sesame Street."
- To begin the process of second language instruction for English children.
- To reflect the bi-cultural riches of our nation.
- To furthermore reflect multicultural aspects of the Canadian environment.
- To portray aspects of indigenous heritage of Canada, both Eskimo and Indian.

The segments would resemble the originals in both style and form, but with a Canadian purpose, including "facts" of Canadian culture and heritage, with particular emphasis on the "bi-cultural fact, the multi-cultural fact, the native Canadian, Indian and Eskimo fact."<sup>126</sup>

The "how" of communicating this Canadianness was partially outlined in a document by Dr. Ellen Regan of OISE about the "How Canadian children live" segments. Regan suggested that they might communicate general values such as sharing and cooperation through segments featuring stories, songs,

paintings, sculpture, and crafts that might be rooted in folk elements including French-Canadian carvings or folk tales, the totem pole, and simple dances that children could do along with the performers on the TV. It would also be possible to show Canadian children from coast to coast living in different environments.<sup>127</sup>

The producers sketched out a series of different types of segments and tasks for the inserts. This included segments on “How Canadian children live” in both English and French, which would explore questions such as:

- How do children live near the water?
- What language are they speaking as we enter their worlds?
- Whom do they encounter in their experiences and what relationships are developed?
- What part of Canada are they from?
- What do they share in common in terms of experience and style of living?

It would also include segments exploring the French language, introducing basic French words that related to the daily environment of Canadian children, a few segments exploring other “native” languages, and segments substituting French for Spanish voice tracks in sequences dealing with the letters of the alphabet and numbers.<sup>128</sup>

By December, the CBC team had produced its first 27 segments and had them vetted by the Canadian pedagogical team and the CTW. There was considerable enthusiasm in the CTW’s New York offices when these first segments were screened.<sup>129</sup> The pedagogical team provided supportive constructive criticism on the segments, while also flagging a few of them that could not be used. Dr. Sam Rabinovitch of the McGill-Montréal Children’s Hospital Learning Centre provided comments on each segment, with particular praise for the five one-minute French lessons, which covered words like the members of the family, numbers, body parts, food, and location terms. Other language-related segments were praised for their playfulness, including one about the egg, which related the pronunciation of “oeuf” to the English “oof” of a grunt, and another on butter, which equated “beurre”

to the English “brrr” noise people made when they are cold. There were at least two particularly nationalist segments, one based on the Canadian flag, and a second in which the ten provinces were used as a tool for counting to ten.

The highest praise was saved for the “How Canadian children live” segments, especially the ones featuring young Peter John, a Cree boy from Cross Lake, Manitoba, who was shown travelling from his reserve community to school via boat.<sup>130</sup> The experts liked these segments showing young Canadian children in their home environments because they provided relatable characters for viewers, while also showcasing Canada’s diversity, whether it be Peter John on his Manitoba reserve, Bobbi riding horses on a farm in Alberta, or Raymond in a New Brunswick port village.<sup>131</sup> Rabinovitch also had some suggestions for future segments, which he thought should include more songs and tunes for children to learn to enhance active participation, portrayals of Canadian heroes in positive ways (especially “Indian” heroes), and greater use of children’s voices for narration. The CRTC agreed to credit stations with a full half hour of Canadian content per week for the program.<sup>132</sup>

Knowlton Nash wrote to television columnists in January to announce the Canadianized version of *Sesame Street*. He highlighted the fact that the Spanish learning segments and those dealing with “Puerto Rican problems and Mexican-American problems” had been replaced “to utilize the time to so some elementary French teaching, to show some Canadian geography and Canadian social situations.” Nash brimmed with pride about the show: “to be honest, I think it’s a damn fine and even thrilling accomplishment by the producers and those in charge of our children’s programming to have achieved this transformation of Sesame into something which has not only enormous value but has direct and immediate pertinence for Canadian youngsters.”<sup>133</sup> The Canadianized version also served the goal of bringing most of the recalcitrant affiliates back to airing *Sesame Street*. By January 23, only five were still holding out.<sup>134</sup>

Canadian television critics responded warmly to the new segments.<sup>135</sup> Some critics observed that one would have to be

an avid viewer to be able to tell which segments were Canadian, given the high production values.<sup>136</sup> The *Montreal Gazette's* L. Ian MacDonald lauded the “quality of restraint, even gentleness, that’s not otherwise found on Sesame Street.” He raved about how the “where Canadian children live” segments showed parts of the country, like a lighthouse in Atlantic Canada, or Peter John travelling to school by boat, which would be unfamiliar to many Canadian children, but would “give half a million Canadians of pre-school age some idea of the land they live in and the diversity of its people.”<sup>137</sup> The only dissenting notes came from supporters of the long-running program *Chez Hélène* (1959–73), who were dismayed that it was being shelved to make way for *Sesame Street*, despite the fact that it provided more minutes per week of French content than *Sesame Street* would.<sup>138</sup>

Parents across Canada were likewise enthusiastically supportive of the new version, and positive letters flowed in to the CBC. Mrs. JJ St-Pierre of Summerside, PEI, thanked the CBC for the “wonderful *Canadian* changes to Sesame Street. They are just great!”<sup>139</sup> Janet Moore of North Vancouver, BC, thought the inserts “made a terrific children’s program into a *really* terrific children’s program,” and opined that she was “sure they’ll help our three preschoolers to be Canadians first, before becoming “semi-Americans” as our generation was — before we became Canadians.”<sup>140</sup> Sally Albrecht wrote that she was pleased to see “a neatly inserted, well thought-out French segment on Sesame Street. Actually reminding our kids they’re Canadians.”<sup>141</sup> Mrs. R.L. (Jane) Saunders of Vancouver bypassed the CBC and wrote directly to Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau to express her belief that “If Canada had a bilingual Sesame Street-type program, you could go down in history as the P.M. who managed to make Canada a truly bi-lingual country — in one generation. Surely Justin has taught you something about how people learn.” She thought that young Canadians could grow up bilingual by watching the show, and this was a better approach than “spending money trying to force middle-age bigots to learn French. ... Let the little children show us the way via the wonder of TV.”<sup>142</sup>

## An Increasingly Canadian *Sesame Street*

Over the next three years, the amount of Canadian content on the CBC version of *Sesame Street* steadily expanded and was averaging 15–16 minutes per episode by 1976. However, McCarthy's ambitious plans to Canadianize the street segments and create a *Sesame Street* North based in Montréal foundered for budgetary reasons, coupled with studio availability problems around the 1976 Montréal Olympics.<sup>143</sup> In the early 1980s, Dodie Robb, the new head of children's television, threatened to cancel the Canadian *Sesame Street* in a period of budget cuts, citing its \$1 million annual price tag for production costs and fees to the CTW.<sup>144</sup> Staffing changes protected the show, however, and by 1983 plans were once again in the works for an increase to 20 minutes per episode of Canadian content, and new recurrent animated characters such as Beau Beaver, who presented Canadian cultural elements like the origins of snowshoes.<sup>145</sup> The CBC continued to increase the show's French content, added segments to highlight Indigenous cultural contributions, and made efforts to diversify the program's cast, including an increasing number of visible minority adult performers. *Sesame Street* also acted as a showcase for other Canadian children's entertainers, such as Raffi and Fred Penner.

In June 1985, Michel Lavoie, who had been producing Canadian *Sesame Street* since 1975, announced at the Banff Television Festival that a more fully Canadian version was in the works, complete with Canadian Muppets.<sup>146</sup> In February 1987, Louis, a bilingual French-Canadian otter, Basil, an English-speaking polar bear who was just starting to learn French, and Dodie, “a spunky, grey-haired bush pilot,” made their debut. *Sesame Street*'s producers aimed to use these new Muppets to “explor[e] bilingualism, regional and cultural diversity, and native heritage” and provide greater continuity for the Canadian show.<sup>147</sup>

## Conclusion

*Sesame Street*'s entry into Canada occurred during a pivotal period for both Canadian broadcasting and Canadian nationalism. The



conflicts over how the CRTC would treat the original American version of the show illustrate the ambivalent reaction of both broadcasters and the Canadian viewing public to these nationalistic regulations. As a high-quality educational program, *Sesame Street* did not fit easily into typical notions of American mass popular culture that Canadian content regulations were partly designed to protect against. Moreover, because the CTW producers refused to permit the airing of commercials, *Sesame* was particularly vulnerable to the economic calculations of broadcasters who relied on the commercial revenues generated by American programming. The show therefore became a useful tool to be deployed against the CRTC by the CBC-affiliated stations and their supporters in the media and in Parliament, who objected to the quantitative Canadian content-based approach to broadcasting policy, while providing them with leverage to force a delay and modification of the CRTC's higher CanCon requirements. These events also illustrate the influence that a well-organized lobby group of citizens — in this case, parents of *Sesame Street*'s pre-school viewers — could have on both broadcasting policy and the decisions of station owners. This case study thus reinforces Marc Raboy's argument that while more powerful interests such as the CBC and the broadcasters tend to play the dominant role in shaping broadcasting policy, citizen groups can, and in this case did, play a role too. They did so first as allies of the broadcasters, and then acting in their own right to push back against the stations' economic arguments against airing *Sesame Street*.<sup>148</sup>

The CBC's decision to purchase, and then Canadianize, *Sesame Street* likewise speaks to Canadian ambivalence regarding American cultural products in the 1970s. While the state broadcasters of some countries, for instance the United Kingdom and Denmark, rejected *Sesame Street* in part because of its "American" approach to education, the CBC's children's television division saw a lot of potential in the program's approach. They thought that a fully Canadian version might be ideal, but the economic constraints that so often limit Canadian dramatic television production militated against this option.<sup>149</sup> The producers of Canadian *Sesame Street* therefore worked within both

their own financial constraints and the rigid controls imposed by the CTW to produce Canadian segments for the program, to try to incorporate material they felt appropriate for Canadian children, and to start inculcating a younger generation of Canadians with a particular version of Canadian identity. They made the argument, in justifying this approach and its associated costs, that this was part of the CBC's mandate under the new Broadcasting Act, both in terms of promoting Canadian identity and for educational television.<sup>150</sup> This ambivalent approach of agreeing to use both an American program and educational television model as a vehicle for fostering Canadian identity demonstrates, as Robert Wright has put it, the "Canadian propensity for pragmatism, flexibility and adaptability."<sup>151</sup>

*Sesame Street* continued to be a mainstay of the CBC's educational television line-up, and every year over 750,000 Canadian children tuned in to watch the program. Many may never have realized that they were being subtly inculcated with messages about the value of bilingualism, of playing with children from many ethno-cultural backgrounds, and of the important cultural contributions of Indigenous peoples. *Sesame Street*, along with other children's programs of the era, helped to normalize certain ways of thinking about how Canadians should live, and thus played a role in shaping the identity politics of the next generation of Canadians. And it was brought to us in part by the letters C, R, T, and C.

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*Bilingualism in English-speaking Canada*, de même que l'ouvrage collectif, *Celebrating Canada, vol.1: Holidays, National Days and the Crafting of Identities*.

## Endnotes

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- 4 Morrow, 77–79.
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- 14 Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 199.
- 15 Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 101–7, 201–11.
- 16 Ryan Edwardson, *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 220–36.
- 17 For an overview, see Stephen Azzi, *Reconcilable Differences: A History of Canada-US Relations* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 2015), 181–208.
- 18 Among others, see Matthew Hayday, *So They Want Us to Learn French: Promoting and Opposing Bilingualism in English-Speaking Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015); Paul Litt, *Trudeaumania* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016); C.P. Champion, *The Strange Demise of British Canada: The Liberals and Canadian Nationalism 1964–1968* (Montréal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2010); Igartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution*.
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- 30 The CBC’s materials on *Sesame Street* at Library and Archives Canada cover the period from 1969–1976. A broader time frame is covered in the CTW’s archives at the University of Maryland, College Park,

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SESAME STREET AND CANADIAN NATIONALISM

- although the amount of material on the Canadian productions is very limited compared with co-productions with other countries.
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- 32 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Merv Stone to Robert Davidson, 16 February 1970. Merv Stone to Eugene Hallman 27 February 1970. Merv Stone to M. Munro, 5 March 1970.
- 33 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Mark Rose to Secretary of State, 17 February 1970.
- 34 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, E.S. Hallman to Joan Cooney and Eugene Aleinekoff, 26 February 1970.
- 35 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Merv Stone to Norn Garriock, 9 March 1970.
- 36 Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 200.
- 37 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Merv Stone to M. Munro, 5 March 1970.
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- 48 L. Ian MacDonald, “Sesame Street – Television’s finest hour in Children’s Programming,” *Montreal Gazette TV Times* (3–9 October 1970).

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- 51 Diana Goldsborough, "Words go into print on Sesame Street," *Toronto Daily Star* (18 July 1970).
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- 53 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Dan McCarthy to Knowlton Nash, 10 September 1970.
- 54 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 613, file 56, Dan McCarthy to Knowlton Nash, 18 February 1970.
- 55 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Dan McCarthy to Knowlton Nash, 10 September 1970.
- 56 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 867, file PG4 "Shirlee Gordon ... views the tube," *The Albertan* n.d. "Bob Shiels on TV – Approaching Squeeze," *Calgary Herald* (9 December 1970).
- 57 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 867, file PG4, Wendell Wilks to Ian Ritchie, 21 January 1971.
- 58 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Knowlton Nash to Norn Garriock, 18 January 1971.
- 59 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Norn Garriock to Hugh Gauntlett, 19 January 1971.
- 60 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, "Shirlee Gordon ... views the tube" *The Albertan*, n.d. [January 1971].
- 61 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, "Bob Shiels on TV – Sesame Street" *Calgary Herald* – n.d. [January 1971].
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- 66 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Eugene Hallman to Barry MacDonald, 29 January 1971.
- 67 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 867, file PG4, R.C. Fraser to CBC senior staff, 3 February 1971.
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BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE LETTERS C, R, T, AND C:  
SESAME STREET AND CANADIAN NATIONALISM

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- 74 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Pauline Gross to Leonard Weinstein, 24 February 1971.
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- 79 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2 Letter from Mrs. Burns McIntyre, 15 March 1971.
- 80 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Letter from Mrs. Wm. Orton, 15 March 1971.
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- 84 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Barry Tenhouse to Hugh Gauntlett, 24 May 1972.
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- 105 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Knowlton Nash to Norn Garriock, 21 December 1970. LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Dorothy McCullum to George Cowley, 26 May 1971.
- 106 NPBA, UMCP, CTW, box 358, File: Sesame Radio-Canada Information Kit CTW Press release, August 1975; Radio-Canada Information Kit for “Sesame.”
- 107 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.1, Knowlton Nash to Dan McCarthy, 16 November 1970
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- 110 “Sesame St. Sub,” *Toronto Daily Star* (21 September 1971).
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- 112 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Dan McCarthy to Knowlton Nash, 23 September 1971.
- 113 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Don Elder to Dan McCarthy, 23 September 1971.

- 114 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to Norn Garriock, 5 October 1971.
- 115 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to Dan McCarthy, 8 October 1971.
- 116 The use of the terms “Indian” and “Eskimo” as generic terms for First Peoples, deprecated in the present day, was common in this period, although the use of other terms to designate Indigenous peoples was starting to be promoted by organizations including the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, founded in 1971.
- 117 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to Norn Garriock, 29 October 1971.
- 118 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to Norn Garriock, 29 October 1971.
- 119 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, E.S. Hallman to Norn Garriock, 16 November 1971.
- 120 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to Norn Garriock, 3 January 1972.
- 121 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Dan McCarthy to Knowlton Nash, 9 March 1972; Dan McCarthy to Dave Connell, 14 March 1972.
- 122 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Dan McCarthy to Knowlton Nash, 10 March 1972. The “discovery” of Canadian English was a relatively recent one. The 1950s and 1960s saw great attention paid to Canadian spelling and pronunciations, and the creation of various Canadian dictionaries. See Steven High, “The ‘Narcissism of Small Differences:’ The Invention of Canadian English, 1951-1967” in *Creating Postwar Canada, 1945–75*, eds. Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008): 89–110.
- 123 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Perry Rosemond to Les McLean, 20 July 1972.
- 124 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Patricia Healy to Merv Stone, 15 September 1972.
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- 126 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.3, “Canadianization of Sesame Street”.
- 127 LAC, RG41, CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.3, “How People Live, Or, How People live in Canada\*. Conceptual Development by Dr. Ellen Regan”.
- 128 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.3, “Canadianization of Sesame Street”.
- 129 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Dan McCarthy to Dale Nelson, 19 December 1972.

- 130 A detailed content analysis of the inserts is beyond the scope of this article, but these segments do raise issues related to questions of representation, particularly around Indigenous peoples, ethno-cultural minorities and French-Canadians. Mary Jane Miller has provided a useful introduction to the scholarly and community-based debates around issues of representation of Indigenous peoples on Canadian television in her book *Outside Looking In: Viewing First Nations Peoples in Canadian Dramatic Television Series* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008). Michele Byers has engaged in a related discussion around issues of race and racism in the *Degrassi* series in her work, including "Canadianizing Canadians: Television, Youth, Identity" in *Canadian Television*, eds. Bredin, Henderson, and Matheson, 115–33. The issue of Indigenous representations on Canadian television connects as well to much broader debates about the politics of recognition, unequal power relations, and Indigenous perspectives on various forms of "inclusion." See Glen S. Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (2007): 437–60. Coulthard engages with broader ideas raised by philosopher Charles Taylor.
- 131 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, M. Sam Rabinovitch, Response to Canadian Inserts for Sesame Street.
- 132 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 867, file PG4, Ian Ritchie to Peter Francis, 19 December 1972; Peter McDonald to Ian Ritchie, 13 February 1973.
- 133 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to television columnists, 22 January 1973.
- 134 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.2, Knowlton Nash to Dan McCarthy, 23 January 1973.
- 135 Sheila McCook, "CBC segments suit Sesame Street," *Ottawa Citizen* (30 January 1973).
- 136 Ned Powers, "Sesame street and Canada," *Star-Phoenix* (Saskatoon), (17 February 1973). Jon Ruddy, "The Canadian Report – Sesame Street now extends into Canada," *TV Guide, Montreal-St-Lawrence edition* (10–16 February 1973).
- 137 L. Ian MacDonald, "Canadian accents heard on Sesame Street," *Montreal Gazette* (10 February 1973).
- 138 Blaik Kirby, "Sesame Street, 'old age' killing off Chez Helene," *Globe and Mail* (26 February 1973).
- 139 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.3, Mrs. JJ St-Pierre to CBC, 16 January 1973.
- 140 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.3, Janet Moore to CBC, 22 January 1973.
- 141 LAC, RG41 CBC, vol. 838, file 265 pt.3, Sally Albrecht to CBC, 16 January 1973.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE LETTERS C, R, T, AND C:  
SESAME STREET AND CANADIAN NATIONALISM

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- 144 NPBA, UMCP, CTW, box 331, file 1979-80, Lane Blackwell to Al Hyslop, 3 June 1980.
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- 147 Sandy Greer, "Cuddly new Canadians," *Toronto Star* (7 March 1987). Marlene Orton, "Big Bird makes room for all-Canadian trio," *Globe and Mail* (16 October 1986).
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- 149 This issue of the cost of Canadian-made drama is recurrent throughout the literature on Canadian television. See for instance Paul Rutherford, "Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada" in *The Beaver Bites Back?* eds. Flaherty and Manning, 276.
- 150 On the 1968 Broadcasting Act, see Raboy, *Missed Opportunities*, 175–81.
- 151 Wright, *Virtual Sovereignty*, 17.