The Globalization of Sesame Street: A Producer's Perspective

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Sesame Street, the Children's Television Workshop's pioneering educational television series for preschoolers, has become an international—as well as an American—institution. Licensed versions, adaptations, and coproductions of the series have been seen in approximately 115 countries. Children in 65 countries have viewed the series in its English-language form. In addition, the program has been coproduced in 13 other languages for broadcast in 50 countries. Each local adaptation of Sesame Street is unique, reflecting the varying educational, social, and cultural needs of children from country to country. This article documents the spread of Sesame Street—and the CTW research and development model—abroad, and includes several case studies of different foreign adaptations of Sesame Street.

The Children's Television Workshop (CTW) shot the first episode of Sesame Street in 1969 in an out-of-the-way studio on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It was as far away from Egypt, Pakistan, Sharjah, and Brunei as anyone present could have imagined.

Sesame Street has changed considerably in the ensuing 22 years. Today, licensed versions, adaptations, and coproductions of Sesame Street are broadcast daily in 89 countries. The series is as much a television institution in Bophuthatswana as it is in Boston, as widely praised in Ankara as it is in Atlanta.

More than 100 million children outside the United States have shared the Sesame Street experience, watching the program in a variety of settings—at home, in school, or in front of the lone communal television set of their village. Sesame Street helps them learn their alphabets and numbers, practice good health habits, and appreciate the richness and diversity of their local cultures and traditions.

What accounts for Sesame Street's unprecedented reception abroad? The key factor is its broad appeal to children. Children like Sesame Street's humor, tempo, characters, stories, and songs. They like its puppets and its fast-paced format. They like its emphasis on audience participation and the sense of mastery it gives them when they learn something new. Here is a program that speaks to them in their own language, on their level, and with respect for their intelligence.

Another important factor is the program's adaptability. Sesame Street is based on a production process, known as "the CTW..."
model,” in which researchers, producers, educators, and other child development experts participate to set the program’s curriculum goals. These goals are subsequently developed into actual program concepts, which are then tested with preschool-age children for clarity and appeal. This process gives Sesame Street producers maximum flexibility to respond to the changing needs of their target audience.

It is this inherent flexibility of the CTW model that has made it so attractive to producers of children’s television programming throughout the world. They recognize in it a methodological approach that is neither doctrinaire nor culture-bound—one that can be used to achieve different educational results in different countries.

The clearest indication of Sesame Street’s adaptability can be seen in the 13 foreign-language versions of the series that CTW has coproduced with foreign broadcasters and producers for airing in their countries or geographical regions. All these coproductions borrow some elements from the American series. However, because each coproduction is designed to meet a unique set of educational goals, no two of them are alike. All coproductions have their own scripts, casts, puppets, sets, animation segments, and live-action films. For example, rather than the character of “Big Bird,” the star of the American version of Sesame Street, the Israeli version features “Kippy Ben-Kipod,” a prickly-on-the-outside, sweet-on-the-inside hedgehog said to represent the Israeli national character. In the Arabic-language series, on the other hand, the principal character is “No’Man,” a camel drawn from Arabic history and tradition.

In virtually all cases, foreign producers and researchers rely on variants of the CTW model to help them create programming that faithfully reflects the linguistic, cultural, social, or religious diversity of their native lands.

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1For more detailed information about the origins of Sesame Street and “the CTW model,” see articles in this issue by Keith Mielke and Valeria Lovelace.