

N Is for News: The Image of the Journalist on *Sesame Street*

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Audiences have been subjected to a barrage of on-screen journalists throughout the history of television and film, imprinting on them the notion of who the journalist is and what constitutes his or her role in the mind of the public. Rarely does this memory discern between the real and fictional portrayals. Time and again, fiction and reality mingle together in the public consciousness, creating an impression of the news media where the two are indistinguishable from one another. Views of real-life journalists are based largely on fictitious representations. In turn, the public psyche and collective understanding of journalism become predicated upon whether these constructed images are negative or positive. According to Joe Saltzman, director of the *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, many representations of the journalist in forms of popular culture dating back to the late nineteenth century have been negative portrayals, perpetually downgrading the profession as a whole.¹

With *Sesame Street*, this notion is particularly significant for two reasons: first, because the program's target age range is preschoolers, ages 3 to 5, the role of the journalist as portrayed on the show is almost certainly defined for the program's viewers for the first time. This will most likely be their earliest exposure to news content that they can comprehend, as well as their first encounter with the format itself. Second, the program remains a vast cultural flashpoint that has reached an economically, racially, and geographically diverse audience

across the globe for 40 years. Studies have shown that the majority of the program's lessons and messages, which include those regarding journalists and news, have been far-reaching and long-lasting: *Sesame Street's* quantifiable effects on social behavior and academic skills have been found to endure for as long as 12 years after initial viewing across cultures and countries. To date, there have been adaptations of the show in 19 different countries including Brazil, China, Germany, Norway, Mexico, Poland, Russia, and Spain. Each reflects the local values and educational priorities of the culture, while retaining the foundation and format of the original American version. According to a study published in *Media Psychology* in 1999, over 30 years of research showed consistent patterns of data indicating that the measureable effects of viewing *Sesame Street* have been proven to endure for more than a decade across a broad range of subject areas. Moreover, many of the significant positive effects for its viewers have been found to be “consistent across cultures and countries as well.”²

This evidence is precisely why the portrayal of the journalist on *Sesame Street* is important. Children will eventually become adult consumers who will remember their childhood impressions, and these impressions ultimately shape their world view. Thus, with a segment like the “News Flash,” it is likely that their feelings about the news media in particular will be affected. *Sesame Street* has been one of the most significant educational kids' shows for generations; based on its widespread cultural influence and longevity, it is highly likely that it has already shaped its viewers' perception of the news media as well. It is important to acknowledge children's perception of the television news media in general, and to also consider the various portrayals of the journalist's image in popular culture by examining a range of familiar stereotypes — stereotypes that, on *Sesame Street*, are consistent with most of the images in popular television shows and films.

Children, Television and *Sesame Street*

At its inception, *Sesame Street* was an experimental 26-part series assembled by Children's Television Workshop, an arm of National Educational Television. It aimed to reel in its young audience by appealing to the educational needs of children in a captivating, entertaining way. The program was originally propounded as an alternative to restructuring the school system so that children would enter school at age 4 (a change that would have cost around \$3 billion, according to Washington correspondent Bruce Bioassat writing in 1969). The project was funded in part by the U.S. Office of Education. Bioassat called the series a "landmark," and one of the most "exhaustively researched and tested undertakings in education of any sort."³ Under the guidance of the workshop's then-executive director, Joan Cooney, 80 or so specialists from a wide range of fields, including film makers, psychologists, educators, writers of children's books, and advertising specialists, developed what they deemed the most effective program to prepare preschool-aged children "for regular schooling and for life itself." The format of the program took cues from entertainment and television commercials, which researchers found captured youngsters' attention most readily.⁴

One key formal aspect *Sesame Street* employed was repetition. The use of the technique (also employed in advertising) was based on the notion that when children receive content in a predictable way, there is a direct positive impact on the young viewers' perception of the content. In a 30-year study by Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio about *Sesame Street* and its impact on children, it was found that "varying the content [of the show] while keeping the format constant promoted familiarity with format conventions."⁵ The study found that viewers derive a unique satisfaction from their familiarity with a repeatedly used format because they gained a sense of mastery of the program's special conventions. The viewers also

were able to enjoy the game-like challenge of making guesses from format clues and then confirming their accuracy, and found fulfillment in the program's frequent use of comic twists, especially when these were parodies of familiar formats, such as a recognizable fairy tale with a silly, twist ending.⁶

One of the main instructional advantages of predictable content was that it could attract the viewing child to focus on what was new in each succeeding application of the format because it stood out against the familiar background, more so than if the entire presentation was brand new. Therefore, learning and concept formation were effectively enhanced.⁷ In her research on child development and television, Judith Van Evra states that *Sesame Street's* success is in large part founded in its formatting and techniques, which "intended to involve children [using] verbal and visual redundancies."⁸

While the study and research over a period of 30 years was to examine the effects of *Sesame Street* in its entirety, the same findings can be applied to the "News Flash" segment itself, which had its own predictable format, age-appropriate and relatable content, and emphasis on learning. Because the audience responded positively to the predictable format of the show, segments within the show that were repeatedly used were also well-received. Therefore, the audience's perception of the habitually aired "News Flash" — and consequently, the news itself — was likely a positive one.⁹

By repeatedly using the same format, the audience could grow familiar with both the type of content to be expected and the method of delivery, giving viewers an increased affinity for it rather than if the skit was just a one-time occurrence. Among the special, predictable conventions of "News Flash" are the same anchor reappearing in every segment to deliver the news in the same way each time; the storyline, with a beginning, middle, and resolution; a

recognizable and often-parodied fairy tale or nursery rhyme; and the format itself, the proverbial news broadcast, distinguishable by its regular use of the same field reporter interviewing subjects and drawing conclusions about the facts he uncovers. Additionally, the “News Flash” often returns to the same story for multiple reports; there are numerous visits with Cinderella, Old MacDonald, the Three Little Pigs, and a series of interviews with Don Music.¹⁰

The repetition used in the “News Flash” provided the same sense of mastery described by Fisch and Truglio in their research about *Sesame Street* and its “special conventions.” Parenthetically, this sense of mastery is essential to the learning process because it allows the child to feel competent and thus able to move on to the next stage of learning.¹¹

Sesame Street News reported content appropriate for children in a format that was relevant to contemporary news. Consequently, content stressing counting and grammar; concepts like “more-less”; societal figures such as the mailman and firefighter; and nursery rhymes drove the narratives of the “News Flash” segments. Children would likely gain a positive experience with television news early on if consuming it while watching *Sesame Street* because they could participate in news consumption via material they understood; news was accessible, relatable, and informative.

How does this translate to children’s perceptions of the real news media? The question is complex and answers are nuanced, but substantial research has shown that when children like the news, they watch it.¹² Additionally, children process information from television differently from adults. Adults make an attribution about the purpose of television content based on their own beliefs and experiences — they will usually categorize it as entertainment, information, persuasion, or any combination of the above. Children, however, tend to process

information from television in the same way they process information from other media and real-life activities. If they do not make the same distinctions upon viewing as do adults, they are likely to process any content as information, which would seemingly increase the impact of television on children to an even greater degree.¹³

Every year, the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) monitors every news story aired on the evening news on CBS, ABC, and NBC, offering insight into the type of content shown and illuminating trends over time. Data gathered between 2000-2004 shows two important trends to consider: first, the majority of news stories are about international and national conflicts of some sort; second, crime reporting is “a staple of the news.”¹⁴ Another study determined that children who did view news programming for entertainment purposes tended to prefer neutral stories that were more information-driven (much like the content in “News Flash”) rather than those about war coverage or disturbing content.¹⁵ Further, stories that led to a feeling of vulnerability or sadness resulted in news avoidance altogether, or at best, the seeking out of neutral stories. These findings yet again point to the interplay between children’s viewing intentions and their emotional reaction to content.¹⁶

With data for content patterns in the news demonstrating that adult news is largely negative, hostile, violent, or emotionally disturbing, and studies showing that enjoyment and emotional reaction to content heavily influence what television programming children will be exposed to, *Sesame Street* is positioned as even more influential than perhaps acknowledged — especially with regards to the news. Because of the positive relationship that exists between viewing and liking news programming, the educational and entertaining “News Flash” segment becomes doubly important. Not only will its concepts and content be widely disseminated, but the formal aspects of the segment — format, style, method of translating

information — will also likely remain imprinted on its viewers and shape their impressions of the news media.

The *Sesame Street* “News Flash”

The first *Sesame Street* segment to emulate real-life news was a prototype of what would later become the recurring news segment known as the “News Flash.” The prototype was called “Sesame Street Sports,” and debuted on the program in 1971. Kermit the Frog reports live from the scene of the latest breaking story, in this case the scene of the Tortoise vs. Hare Race. Kermit wears a plaid coat, less formal attire than his later-to-be-seen reporter trench coat and fedora, and as usual, he is unaware that he is on-camera when he first appears.¹⁷

The “Sports” segment was followed by a small number of regular “News Flash” skits that aired the same year, and the “News Flash” eventually became a recurring series, with new segments running until the 1980s. The segments continued to appear regularly as reruns on the show until 1988. Since then, the sketches in their original incarnation became increasingly rare, having evolved into segments with guest appearances from real-life journalists and other modifications.¹⁸

The “breaking story” is usually a well-known nursery rhyme or fairy tale, with a bit of a twist on the commonly known narrative. In other cases, Kermit reports live from moments in history, such as the Boston Tea Party. And while the “News Flash” is an educational tool that is used to teach fundamentals like grammar and important social concepts such as cooperation and the importance of reading, it also functions as an entertaining way for kids to begin to understand the news, warts and all, as we will see.

For this study, every “News Flash” segment that aired, as well as each episode that

contained references to or guest appearances by real-life journalists or news figures was viewed. After watching more 80 episodes and reading transcripts, the segments were compared to existing research on the image of the journalist in popular culture. Then the segments were relegated to specific categories of journalists based on the main stereotypes found in film and television historically. Most of those stereotypes end up being negative; even if the journalist isn't always the villain, the image of him on-screen is usually pitiful at best.

Saltzman points out that, from the start, educated classes were critical of the new wealth and power of the press. They complained that the mass circulation dailies, with their “big, black headlines screaming of murder, misfortune, and madness, pandered to the semi-literate and poisoned the atmosphere of American life.”¹⁹ The novels and short stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that built their narratives around journalists did so in a way that jabbed at the profession. Because of this depiction, journalists have longed for acknowledgment from the public that their jobs were significant. Although they appeared to be indifferent to criticism of the press in general, most journalists “were deeply hurt by their failure to gain respect.”²⁰ We will see this sentiment echoed by Kermit's subjects frequently, as well as his own struggle to prove himself a worthy, societal figure against “public” (a.k.a. muppet) skepticism and indifference, along with various other familiar pop culture depictions of the journalist. The effort to incorporate the broad range of portrayals of the newsman and news itself, as seen in adult popular culture, is consistent with the show's stipulated goal of preparing young viewers for the real-life societal conventions they will encounter.

The “News Flash” became the signature segment through which *Sesame Street* represented the image of the journalist. The recurring clip was a news bulletin that interrupted the “regular” program and mimicked the format of real-life, grown-up news. Kermit the Frog is

the program's roving field reporter, wearing a trench coat and matching hat, and peppering his urgent language with journalistic catchphrases and jargon. Kermit's appearance and demeanor, when combined with the format of the skit, culminate to create an authentic, albeit fictitious and kids-only, news show. As a portrayal of news media, the "News Flash" becomes crucial; for young children it will be their first encounter with any format of television news, an otherwise foreign, adult program.

The segments span two to five minutes, featuring Kermit the Frog in his full reporter attire, interrupting the regularly scheduled program to bring viewers the fast-breaking story of the day. The "News Flash" graphic blazes on screen,²¹ with a voiceover that announces: "We take you now to Kermit the Frog, with another fast-breaking news story." The stodgy, authoritative voice speaks over staged Morse code dispatches and the iconic sound effects of the news wire. The camera takes viewers to Kermit the Frog, the program's probing reporter, who is always live at the scene of the story. Kermit is usually distracted during the opening shot of the story, often first seen speaking to someone from production who is off-camera, facing the wrong way, or discussing the specifics of the shoot before he realizes the camera is already rolling. Then, he quickly jumps into reporter mode to perform his stand-up in character, identifying himself professionally by stating, "This is Kermit the Frog, with Sesame Street News." He then proceeds to explain the details of the story with the same urgency and enthusiasm a real-life reporter would be expected to convey. These expectations, of course, are based largely on the way Hollywood has chosen to portray the journalist, through common stereotypes that Kermit also adopts.

Relentless in pursuing the story, Kermit always attempts to enlighten both viewers and his interviewees by asking prying questions. In an effort to bring the story to life for the

audience, he is enthusiastic and speaks with a sense of importance as he describes to viewers exactly what is happening. He often repeats what the interviewee has just told him, in order to reiterate the information for his young viewers. He constantly refers directly to the audience as well, requesting that his subjects “explain to the viewers at home” or “tell the audience” how they feel about the story. Kermit also finds it his duty to impart his higher knowledge obtained because of the proximity only a reporter can achieve and to aid viewers in navigating the stories’ narratives. While the skits’ subjects can be educational at times just by their very content, Kermit often explains new concepts to viewers and to the subjects of his interviews.

Howard Good asserts that the screen is a natural dwelling place for the journalist, and that moviemakers have long been attracted to the subject. He points out that some of the earliest sound movies were “newspaper dramas,” drawing on the familiar stereotype of “scheming editors and hard-drinking reporters.” Good notes that every year brings more and more journalists to the screen, seen through the lens of various stereotypes, “sometimes to play the hero, sometimes the villain, and sometimes something of both.”²² Kermit is no exception. The image of the journalist he conveys touches on several familiar depictions of the on-screen journalist, many simultaneously. The crusading reporter, the investigative reporter as a comic relief or a victim, and the pack reporter are commonly used depictions of journalists in contemporary film. In the “News Flash,” Kermit embodies the TV reporter dynamically, bringing these various stereotypes to life for a young and extensive audience.

Kermit the Frog as a Crusading Reporter

On a basic level, at least from an adult perspective, the series of “News Flash” segments can be considered a parody of the news, with Kermit the Frog reporting from the scene of popular fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and common children’s narratives featuring

Pinocchio²³ and Humpty Dumpty.²⁴ The well-known stories frequently deviate from their predictable plot lines with unexpected twists, a characteristic often typical of satires. When Kermit is reporting live from the nursery rhyme “Hickory Dickory Dock,”²⁵ he stands valiantly in front of the infamous grandfather clock and explains the familiar tale: Just before the clock strikes one, a mouse is expected to run up the clock, which will strike one, and then the mouse will run down.

Kermit yells, “Okay! Send in the mouse!” But to his dismay, in walks a cow, who declares she is much too big to climb the clock. Kermit, frustrated with the interruption, apologizes to the audience and assures viewers the mouse will be arriving any second. Then, in walks a duck, who quacks, “Just show me the clock and tell me what to do, QUACK!” Kermit, who is losing patience, explains this is not Hickory Dickory Duck, and looks fretfully into the camera, saying, “Hang in there time-piece fans, because in just a moment, the mouse will be here.”

Unfortunately, it’s a horse that arrives next: “Out of my way, frog, I’m going to run up that clock of yours.” To which Kermit replies, “You can’t do that, you’re a horse!” The horse, unfazed, states, “I know, but the mouse couldn’t make it.” The horse takes a running start as a horrified Kermit looks on, and barrels into the clock, destroying it.

“There you have it, folks. The horse has just ran up — er, through — the clock and the clock has struck about 17. This is Kermit the Frog signing off.” The duck makes a wise quack: “I’ve heard of killing time but this is ridiculous!” Then, as if yelling to production, Kermit loses it, saying, “How come I always get these nursery rhyme things? I can’t keep going like this! I’m getting outta here!”

While the segment is a silly and entertaining reprieve from the normally educationally driven *Sesame Street*, there is something more serious to consider. The portrayal of the journalist by Kermit parallels one of the many images proliferated by Hollywood. Here, Kermit is the altruistic, truth-seeking journalist who wants to serve the audience and abide by professional journalistic values. The reporter as a crusader, or crusading reporter, is a journalistic stereotype coined by Alex Barris as one of eight categories of the journalist's image as constructed in film, and is defined by his ability to perform "worthwhile functions" in his/her community. The crusading reporter upholds the notion that only the journalist is capable of revealing the truth and putting the good of society before any other goal. Barris's crusading reporter often confronted corrupt politicians head-on and exposed scandals at any cost, even risking his life.²⁶

In *Sesame Street*, Kermit's "crusades" speak to less severe themes than political corruption and exposing social evils, but they are conducted nonetheless within the same framework and same intention. He is eternally striving to achieve one task, which according to Sandra L. Borden, is the chief task of the journalist: to "seek and share the truth using reliable processes of inquiry and verification."²⁷ It's a familiar depiction of the journalist in pop culture, especially on screen. In *All the President's Men*, this journalistic ethic is built into the newsroom at the *Washington Post*, where editor Ben Bradlee insists on irrefutable facts and cautious methods, and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein are defined entirely by their profession, portrayed as seekers and guardians of truth who are working solely for the public. Borden states that journalists "pride themselves on obtaining details that thoroughly and accurately convey an event, especially those that can be verified by others," and then turning those details into a news story by working within conventional formats of news.²⁸ If the plan

deviates from its intended course, the journalist feels like a failure or a hack. In *All the President's Men*, Woodward and Bernstein become frustrated and angry when their investigation reaches dead ends; in *Sesame Street*, Kermit is visibly upset, self-deprecating, and dejected at having fumbled the story.

Kermit is intent on getting the scoop, and getting it right, but often this proves to be an impossible mission. For Kermit, and often the on-screen journalist in general, the story itself is the obstacle; in one “News Flash” case, a soft news story prevents the desired outcome. When Kermit reports from a day care center in which he interviews children,²⁹ the “News Flash” logo appears as expected, but this time the voiceover introduces the segment by saying, slower than usual, and hesitantly, “We take you now to Kermit the Frog with a slow-breaking ... human ... interest ... story.” The message is clear from the start: only hard news is “fast-breaking,” and this isn’t such a story. The human interest piece has generally been looked down upon among journalists, and correspondingly, audiences. During the twentieth century, female reporters were generally given stories that had an emotional angle and thus were considered “soft” news, later referred to as “sob stories.”³⁰ Female journalists in film usually fight against covering such stories, instead going after fast-breaking, thrilling stories as aggressively as any hardened newsman. A modern reference to this type of journalism can be seen in *Anchorman* through Veronica Corningstone (Christina Applegate’s character). “The little lady at the news desk,” as Ron Burgundy calls her condescendingly, shows up to be taken seriously as a journalist, only to find that her assignments are foolish human interest stories, like a cat fashion show.

The hard news reporter’s general distaste for human interest stories is prevalent in contemporary popular culture’s depiction of journalists, and Kermit is no exception. He asks Muppet Baby Monsters about their career aspirations, but he is clearly aware of the story’s lack

of newsworthiness and becomes exasperated at its banality, ending up feeling misunderstood and ineffectual. Kermit interviews the baby monsters about what they want to be when they grow up, and gives a cookie to each baby after the interview. The Cookie Monster then pretends to be a baby monster and says he wants to grow up to be an orthodontist, hoping that will get him a cookie too. Kermit sees through the ploy and gives the Cookie Monster a set of teeth to chew on instead. Still, despite Kermit's astuteness, he ends up being misunderstood because when he says to Cookie Monster, "These are to chew," the Cookie Monster replies, "Gesundheit," as if he sneezed. Kermit gives his usual exasperated look into the camera, and signs off with a weary expression, knowing the futility of the story and his own unimportance.³¹

Kermit expresses distaste for stories that do not allow him to utilize his full intellectual potential and thus enlighten the audience and deliver a truth that they wouldn't otherwise have access to. He becomes indignant when he is forced to report on the types of stories that do not allow him to fulfill this duty. In a segment where Kermit conducts man-on-the-street interviews in order to find out and report back what makes people angry,³² no one will talk to him. All the passers-by say they are too busy to stop, and he becomes increasingly impatient. After several rejections, Kermit, looking defeated, spots a young boy and before he can even get the whole question out, the kid says, "Sorry I'm late for the game, so long!" Kermit looks directly into the camera with his signature scrunched-up muppet face, and conveying frustration and defeat, he lets out a furious, stifled, growl. Two more people, including his good friend, Grover, pass by only to blow him off for lack of time as well. One lady even preempts his question by saying, "I already have one, thank you," hurriedly assuming this is a sales frog and not an investigative reporter.

Finally Kermit loses control as he yells, “Cut! Cut! I’ve had it!” During his rant, a man stops to ask Kermit, “Are you angry?” Kermit, thinking he may calm down, replies, “Yes I’m angry! And would you like to know why?” The man apologizes and says he has no time. Now Kermit explodes in a fit of rage and yells into the camera to sign off: “This is Kermit the ANGRY Frog reporting! And would YOU like to know why I’m angry?! I’ll tell you why I’m angry!” Just then, sound is cut by production and the cheerful voiceover returns to announce, “That’s all the time we have today with Kermit the Frog,” leaving Kermit to become a talking — actually, screaming — head, going ballistic on-camera with no sound as the program fades to black. Besides serving as a clever illustration of “anger,” one of many emotions the program defines for its young audience, *Sesame Street* is also taking a jab at a familiar portrayal of the journalist on-screen. This image of Kermit parallels the popular depiction of the journalist as an emotionally unstable person, ready to fly off the handle at any moment. It also serves to remind both the reporter, and the audience, that only the network has real control — and it’s ready to fade out of the shot, play benign music, and cut to commercial whenever necessary.³³

Perhaps there is no better example of the portrayal of the journalist as a loose cannon than Peter Finch’s 1976 role in *Network*. His character, Howard Beale, learns he will be fired for poor ratings. The seasoned anchorman becomes outraged, and seemingly losing his grip on reality, goes on air to announce his own suicide. He then promptly gets fired. Beale gets an opportunity to say farewell to viewers, but instead he goes back on-camera to rant that “life is bullshit.” When the network decides to exploit Beale’s psychotic antics for ratings and let him go back on air yet again, his anger frantically builds and he ultimately gives his infamous, mad-as-hell speech, yelling into the homes of viewers, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!” Here, the journalist is presented as a sheer lunatic, a ticking human time

bomb. Beale's rage and Kermit's man-on-the-street fiasco are both starkly representative of what Loren Ghiglione and Joe Saltzman describe as "the journalist who goes berserk in a crazy world where news is more showbiz than information."³⁴

Kermit's work frequently leaves him exhausted and frustrated, but he continues his efforts in pursuit of worthwhile news stories and the greater public good, which are the crusading reporter's exemplary values. Perhaps if Kermit had faced a hard-lined, ratings-hungry editor, or was sent to report away from the nursery rhymes and fairy tales that characterized his familiar beat on *Sesame Street*, he may have ended up like many of his crusading on-screen counterparts. Most cinematic reporters in this category tended to become burn-outs, like Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's now-infamous Hildy Johnson, who is left jaded and cynical from a lifetime of chasing something as elusive as truth, only to uncover the moral reprehensibility of society. Johnson spends the entire play, *The Front Page*, trying to leave journalism to marry the woman he loves and go on to another profession. Instead, he is continually pulled back, whether it's criminal Earl Williams' escape that keeps him entangled in the potential story of a lifetime, prostitute Mollie Malloy's leap out the window and editor Walter Burns's subsequent entrance, or the stolen watch in the last act. Johnson does not free himself of being a newspaperman. *The Front Page* reinforces the theme that journalism is an inescapable trap, an elusive chase after something intangible, ultimately leading to the journalist ending up a drunk, a cynic, or a failure. It is a bad business, full of "lazy, callous, profane" reporters and editors like Walter, who is "truly a model of 'thoughtless, pointless, nerve-drumming unmorality.'" Matthew C. Ehrlich points out that for most of the play, the message is clear: "You can never escape the lousy newspaper business, at least not without one heck of a fight."³⁵

Because the journalist “sees the powerful up close with all their warts and is subject to manipulation because he or she is their conduit to the public,” reporters often used cynicism as a way of coping with their jobs. Those journalists who turned their experiences into fiction commonly wrote of burned-out journalists whose idealism had turned sour, a theme alluded to in the stage version of *The Front Page* in which Hildy tells his colleagues that they will end up as ‘gray-headed, humpbacked slobs, dodging garnishees when you’re ninety.’”³⁶ Cinema has upheld this particular theme, either with reporters who enlighten the naïve and bring the self-righteous back down to earth, as in *The Front Page* (and its remake *His Girl Friday*), or by showing reporters who embrace a higher cause and return to their idealism, as in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Meet John Doe*, and *Call Northside 777*. This vacillation between honoring the reporter’s aims and attacking the portrayal of the journalist as a cynic is an attempt to “teach audiences to strive for a healthy balance between cynicism and idealism.”³⁷

In spite of any cynicism or breakdowns he might have, Kermit the Frog also embodies other recognizable images of the cinematic journalist. Certainly not a mirror image of the whiskey-slugging, wisecracking newspaperman, Kermit inhabits some of the traits that have become “identifying symbols, and ultimately clichés, of onscreen” madcap journalists, becoming a sort of screwball “lite” reporter at times.³⁸

In addition to talking fast and playing hardball, slugging back whiskey, and forgetting to shave, one of the signature traits of the screwball journalism comedies is that the journalist gets the story *and* the girl. The screwball comedies presented “a mythic view of romantic and democratic possibilities” whereby “the wrenching economic misery of the Depression is glossed over in stories of common reporters meeting and marrying heiresses.”³⁹

In these films, the reporter often discovered that the story he was chasing and his

romantic interest became one and the same. Frank Capra's 1934 film *It Happened One Night* is the quintessential screwball comedy in which a spoiled heiress is nothing more than story fodder for out-of-work reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable's character). By the end of the film, both love and Warne triumph. Capra films like *It Happened One Night* added to *The Front Page* formula of the journalist's image and plot line by injecting laughter and romance as the tool of social critique while the methods of the media were less directly scrutinized.⁴⁰

Trenchcoat-clad Kermit manages to get the girl occasionally, too. In "News Flash: Sleeping Beauty,"⁴¹ Kermit reports from inside the castle where the fairy tale princess is asleep, waiting for the prince to wake her with a ceremonial kiss. The prince arrives, does his princely duty, and she wakes in a cloud of smoke, which clears to reveal she has turned into a frog. Kermit, thrilled by the newly developed scoop, exclaims, "Folks! Folks! We've just seen history in the making! The prince's kiss did wake the princess but it turned her also into ... a ... hmm ... beautiful young frog." The little frog princess gazes up at Kermit with sleepy, bedroom eyes and says, "Howdy, Handsome." The prince looks around confused, but Kermit is smitten. The frog princess tells Kermit she is starving, having been asleep for a hundred years, and inquires about breakfast. He suggests a "nice delicatessen," saying, "C'mon, sweetheart," as he starts walking out of the frame. In the last instant, Kermit shouts over his shoulder, "Hey, listen, we return you now to your regularly scheduled programming," as he leaves behind an awestruck prince. His swagger is as confident as any Capra journalist as he moves off-screen. Here, Kermit falls "in love with the scoop he was pursuing; the story and the love interest become one," and he momentarily personifies one of Capra's screwball reporters — even if only temporarily — who is witty and astute enough to get the scoop and the girl, albeit minus the flask of bourbon.⁴²

Kermit the Frog as an Investigative Reporter: Comedic Relief and Victim

Often, when the journalist is portrayed in a comedy on-screen, he is the target of jest, subject to mockery and ridicule by the subjects of his own interviews. Specifically, it is the character of the television reporter above all other types of journalists who receives the brunt of this degradation, “universally branded with the mark of Cain” and wholly depicted as “silly,” clumsy, foolish, and not in command of the situation.⁴³

The film industry often portrays the television reporter as “an almost unbroken chain of unflattering and/or ridiculous characters.” In one study of 17 feature films containing TV reporters, two-thirds were depicted as “silly, callous, disgusting, evil, unscrupulous, insensitive, and/or sensationalist.”⁴⁴ For example, in *Cold Turkey* (1971), Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding play bumbling network reporters named Paul Hardly and Walter Cronic. *Airport 1975* (1974) conveys an unbearable newsman who is obnoxious and arrogant. After an airliner is involved in a mid-air collision, the newsman disrupts the rescue efforts at the airport. In *Visit to a Small Planet* (1960), a newsman meets a man from outer space who has the ability to make the news commentator say anything he compels him to say, including blubbering “Mary Had a Little Lamb” while on the phone with his network boss.⁴⁵

As much as he wishes to embody the seriousness of his craft and journalistic integrity, Kermit is often reduced to comedic circumstances at the request of his subjects, or merely as the unsuspecting target of a joke. On an anonymous tip, Kermit braves a severe snow storm⁴⁶ to investigate a report that “some strange person” has been standing out in the snow “for a long time.” Amidst flurrying snow and howling winds, Kermit assures viewers that they will “see it *first*” on his news program and asks people passing by if they have been standing out there for “a long time.” He talks to several people, all of whom respond that they have only been out “a

short time,” and, unsuccessful, Kermit returns viewers to the regular program. This “News Flash” is a three-part one, “interrupting” the regular program with updates from the diligent reporter, who is becoming a colder and more frozen frog with each interruption, ending up waist-deep, and eventually buried completely in the snow. Ice-covered and motionless, Kermit stutters that he will “p-p-pursue every lead” until able to find this mysterious fellow in the snow. He is fully committed to providing his service to the public and delivering the story at any cost. Then, a youngster arrives on the scene, struggling to hold back laughter. The prankster finally reveals to Kermit that he’s the one who made the call to the station. Enthusiastic about uncovering a lead at last, Kermit asks him to name the identity of the one who has been standing in the snow “a long time.” The now-hysterical boy bursts out, “YOU!” Kermit’s hopes are dashed at once, and the sneezing, freezing frog signs off, visibly hurt and shocked at both the irony and the insolent offense, having become the joke of the town and a failure at his own story.

In another “fast-breaking news story,” Kermit is at the children’s zoo⁴⁷ asking people about their favorite animals. He happens to be standing in front of three attention-craving pigs who are disgruntled that pigs are not among people’s favorite animals. Finally, Kermit turns to the pigs at the end of the segment and asks them what their favorite animal is, and they all say frogs, because they say “ribbit,” hop around, and are green. Kermit, slightly amused and flattered, is about to sign off when one of the pigs asks him to hop around “just a little.” Kermit is hesitant, but can’t resist indulging them, so he hops up and down while saying “ribbit, ribbit.” Then, mid-hop, he tells the pigs “Well, you guys have good taste. I’ll give you that,” as he abandons his professional credibility in exchange for indulging his fans and his ego, and hops off as the segment ends. Kermit has become merely entertainment.

Not only is Kermit subject to pranks and reduced to entertaining rather than reporting, he also fails to get the respect that he, like most reporters, believes he deserves. When Kermit interviews Elmo about his new game idea,⁴⁸ he explains pedantically to Elmo that an idea is a “thought that exists in the mind,” and that, as a reporter, he is interested in the youth’s new ideas for games. Elmo says he does have an idea — it’s for a new game. Kermit is thrilled, until he learns Elmo wants to play “The Reporter Game.” Although Kermit insists this isn’t a good idea — in fact, he says, “It’s a BAD idea ”— Elmo ignores him, strips Kermit of his microphone (a reporter’s ultimate symbol of power), and speaks to the audience playfully: “This is Elmo for ‘Sesame Street News!’ Haha! Haha.” Kermit gets frustrated because he is losing control over the interview, and the two continue to wrestle for the microphone. Clearly, young Elmo does not regard Kermit as someone of authority or deserving of respect. This disregard for his position as a reporter only makes Kermit cling to his role more, hoping to establish himself as a source of importance, but not succeeding.

Kermit the Frog as a Pack Reporter

In innumerable movies, television programs, and novels, reporters travel in packs to cover fast-breaking news by harassing their subjects and shoving their way into breaking news events. When most people recall journalists from film, they first remember the anonymous broadcast reporters played by “nondescript actors, who chase after a story by rudely invading people’s privacy ... armed with lights, cameras and microphones. The public watched uncomfortably as these obnoxious reporters filled the movie and, especially, the TV screens. They poke their cameras into people’s faces, yell out questions, recklessly pursue popular actors — the kind who used to play journalists once cheered by audiences,”⁴⁹ only to become perceived as villains by both those who they chase and by audiences.

Although Kermit travels and reports alone, when chasing after his stories he does not escape being cast as a pack reporter. As a journalist who is principally after the story, he might confront the innocent in times of tragedy, loss and emotional turmoil — a familiar depiction of the journalist in both fiction and real life. Before Ben Hecht wrote *The Front Page* with Charles MacArthur, he worked as a Chicago newspaperman, admittedly committing offenses as reprehensible as his fictitious, on-screen journalists would. Hecht smuggled burglar's tools in his hidden coat pockets — especially sewn in for the covert purpose of breaking into homes of the bereaved in his quest for photographs of the victims and their killers.⁵⁰

In the television series *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), the hour-long dramatic show explored some of the classic stereotypes of reporters, including the notion of ruthless, crude journalists who are just out to get their story. Furthermore, this kind of mercilessness was the expected protocol of the journalist, considered appropriate behavior and the only real way to get the story. Joe Rossi (played by Robert Walden) is a brash, arrogant reporter who, despite his character flaws, is still respected by his editor, Grant: “Now take Rossi. There's someone who doesn't care at all about other people's feelings. He's arrogant, pushy, abrasive, obnoxious, uncaring, insensitive. That's what makes him a good reporter.”⁵¹

Despite Kermit's overall nature as the loveable mouthpiece for education and public service, his character also falls into this inevitable negative depiction of the media. He takes his turn at playing the reporter who is merely part of the larger, harassing herd, relentless in hounding innocent victims. In Kermit's report, “The Three Little Pigs: The Day After,”⁵² Kermit interviews three emotionally-raw little piggies who are less than thrilled to have their lives and emotions so insensitively probed. Kermit introduces the segment with his signature persuasive sign-on that supports his role as reporter: “I am standing beside the homes — or

should I say the former homes — of the Three Little Pigs!” He is excited by the prospect of such a good story, regardless of the tragedy for those innocent victims involved. One of the pigs approaches, and Kermit meets him with indifference to his trauma, asking fervently and unapologetically, “Excuse me, pig! Pardon me, pig! Uh, pig! Kermit the Frog here, Sesame Street News. I was wondering, I can see that your house, which was made of straw, was, uh, virtually, uh, it doesn’t exist anymore. Can you tell our audience how you feel about that ... please?”

Appalled, the first pig retorts, “Can I tell you how I *feeeel* about that? What kind of a *dumb* question is *that*? I’m ANGRY! Mmmmmm! That’s how I feel about that! How would YOU feel if some big wolf came along and huffed and puffed and blew YOUR house down, huh? ANGRY! That’s how you’d feel!” Satisfied with the pig’s emotional account, Kermit replies apathetically, “Yes, OK, angry.” Further incensed at Kermit’s reporter-like insensitivity, the pig huffs, “Oh, you newscasters! Grrrrrr!” as he stalks off.

The segment ends on a positive note, with the final and, evidently, most intelligent pig inviting the two displaced piggies into his still intact brick dwelling. This incident also serves to illustrate the meaning of specific emotions to its young audience, in that “angry,” “sad,” and “proud” are all defined vividly through action and reaction in the skit. *Sesame Street* often depicted public figures for its young audience in order to define their societal roles, i.e., who is a police officer, who is the postman, etc. In addition to the illustration of particular emotions and an entertaining narrative, this particular segment also extends a message about who the reporter is in society. It is important to note that it is an extremely rare instance when a societal figure generally regarded as a public servant is negatively portrayed on *Sesame Street*.

This portrayal certainly remains consistent with a very commonly used image of the journalist in popular culture. The anonymous reporter who hounds people and their stories is perhaps the most prevalent image of the journalist propounded by television, film, and literature. It is an inescapable pitfall, even for the lovable, well-intentioned Kermit the Frog.

While fiction has no trouble conveying what Ghiglione calls the “sleazy side of the journalist,” since such depictions are based in reality, even if crudely so, there is a failure to portray the opposite, good-natured, or at least simply professional image. Journalists’ professionalism usually gets left out of contemporary fiction and film, so that after the public absorbs a film or show, it is likely to judge journalists much more harshly than before. Whether the public accuses the journalist of maligning the facts or carelessly getting them wrong, promoting deviant behavior, or imposing a “world-wide condition of ‘moral slavery’” on the unsuspecting public, people love to hate the journalist.⁵³

The danger in this, according to Ghiglione, extends beyond just a bad reputation or bruised ego. In a nationwide survey in 1991, more than half of Americans said that government should have “some power of censorship” over the press, and more than 25 percent did not believe that the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech applied to newspapers. If public reaction to such portrayals is to “punish the journalist” or to seek damages by truly limiting their ability to perform their job (because the perception is that they are doing a selfish disservice rather than working in the public interest), then the way the journalist is portrayed in popular culture becomes even more crucial to examine.⁵⁴

Further, it becomes exponentially important to understand how the journalist is being conveyed to an audience of children. Despite Kermit’s portrayal of certain negative stereotypes of the journalist, *Sesame Street* seems to be an exception to the way popular culture

habitually treats the press. Kermit seems to function as both comic relief for viewers, as well as a way to let the young audience in on the joke — sort of like prepping them on society’s view of the journalist. While Kermit ultimately embodies a positive image of a reporter, if for nothing else than his loveable ambition and dedication, he does, at times, inhabit some of the unsavory characteristics of the journalist often seen in real-life and in fiction. It seems logical that “News Flash” would introduce this notion to its audience, however gently, to remain consistent with the overarching concept of the show. *Sesame Street* attempts to prepare its young viewers for the social constructs of the world they will enter upon adulthood. In addition to teaching academic skills, *Sesame Street* has always emphasized the importance of fostering social skills as part of its stipulated curriculum. For example, identifying the role of the family and the roles of different individuals within one’s neighborhood, city, or town are common themes. Understanding the structure and function of different social institutions that children will encounter, such as an airport, the post office, and consequently, the news, is also a part of the program’s specified goals.⁵⁵

Despite veering into “pack journalist” territory occasionally, Kermit can be generally regarded as a trustworthy character, made evident by his reporting ethics and his own declarations of integrity. It is the greater societal distrust of the news media by and large that seems to be echoed in the children’s program, even if only seldomly and delicately. Hollywood has given audiences an ample supply of reporters corrupted by cynicism, the dark ambition to rise to the top at any cost, to drink, to disregard the lives and reputations of others, and to forfeit the truth if it makes for a better story. It’s no surprise that audiences have come to distrust journalists — from the first film production of *The Front Page* to the latest, decades of movies have propounded that reporters casually invent the news, ignoring what really

happened, and that the newsroom is just a “giant nursery seething with infantile beings.”⁵⁶ The most palpable examples of *Sesame Street* reflecting the public’s negative perception of the media are muppets’ reactions to the guest appearances made by real-life journalists, and most significantly, the curmudgeony and aptly named Grouch News Network (GNN).

Oscar the Grouch as a Curmudgeon and Renegade Reporter

Occasionally, instead of “News Flash” interrupting the program with the usual voiceover and Kermit the Frog, a grumpy voice alerts the audience: “GNN interrupts this program, just ’cause we feel like it, so there!” Oscar the Grouch reports from headquarters (his trashcan) to bring the viewers only “all grouchy, all disgusting, all yucky news, all the time.”⁵⁷

In one segment, while Oscar is reporting on an elephant that is stuck in Maria’s bathroom, GNN interrupts breaking news that takes viewers live to a scene with the Cookie Monster, who accidentally breaks his cookie in half. He is dismayed that he has broken the cookie, but Oscar inadvertently points out that now he has two cookies. Cookie Monster hugs Oscar, much to his disgust, and then Grundgetta (Oscar’s female counterpart) calls to scold him because hugging on camera is against GNN regulations. Back in Maria’s bathroom, the struggle continues to get the elephant out, while Oscar’s star reporter, Slimey, is digging up some dirt (literally). Grundgetta calls Oscar again to complain and threatens to change the channel, saying, “This show is way too clean!”⁵⁸

The segment finishes with Oscar accidentally luring the elephant out of the bathroom with a bag of peanuts, and then being touted, along with GNN, as a hero for saving the day. Depressed, Oscar thinks he’s ruined, only to learn that he has won a Phlegmmy Award for the grouchiest news show. The grouches say they love the show because all of the niceness makes them feel even grouchier. In his acceptance speech, Oscar threatens to thank his news crew, but

says he won't because a true grouch doesn't thank anyone. He signs off, saying, "Good night and good yuck!"

Another grouchy situation arises with a celebrity sighting: Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty are playing checkers, but her narcolepsy is frustrating the prince. Oscar bets that the prince won't be able to wake her with a kiss; unfortunately for Oscar, it works. The two stars shower him with affection, while Beauty adoringly says, "How I love the paparazzi!"⁵⁹

It is interesting to note that GNN is referenced here as paparazzi, not news. There is a subtle yet clear distinction being made for young viewers between what constitutes news — evidently, Sesame Street News and Kermit the Frog — and what constitutes paparazzi, a concept that may be foreign to such a young audience for the moment, but one which they will eventually come to understand as something negative, in poor taste, and for now, "grouchy."

At another time, Anderson Cooper of CNN makes a cameo⁶⁰ filling in for Oscar the Grouch on GNN, reporting live from Oscar's trashcan. Cooper emerges, microphone in hand, from Oscar's notorious headquarters, to interview some legendary — and very grouchy — newscasters. Walter Cranky and Dan I'd-Rather-Not, two curmudgeons who will do anything to foil Cooper's attempts at an interview about the letter G, make the whole interview a near impossibility. Cooper is investigating whether the letter G is a "g-g-g-good" or "g-g-g-grouchy" letter, so he asks Dan if he'll share his opinion, but the spoilsport can only muster a whiny, drawn-out "I'd rather noooooot." Cooper asks Walter Cranky the same question, eliciting only a cantankerous, growly "Grrrrrrrrr." This charade continues as Cooper exclaims that he's "been in some tight situations, but nothing like this."

Despite the tough interviewees, Cooper does his best to present both of the potential

sides of the letter G to the audience by explaining that some think it's a "grouchy letter, because of words like 'goo' and 'gross.' But, some think it's not grouchy because it begins nice words like 'good.'" Examples of G words scroll by on a ticker at the bottom of the screen, mimicking the sports scores or the NASDAQ on the rival news station. Just when Cooper is at his wit's end, Oscar returns. He says he'll just have to answer the question himself, because that's what you do when you don't get the answer — make it up. That's "Grouch Journalism," Oscar says, adding, "Of course, it's a grouchy letter!"

Cooper explains that he couldn't get the interview because Cranky and I'd-Rather-Not refused to answer the question, but Oscar is pleased, and simply replies, "Yeah, that's what made them great." The Grouch then signs off, promising an appearance from Diane Spoiler next time, and invites Cooper to return to the show. Cooper insists he would never do so, saying he'd hate to experience this type of bad reporting and frustration again. Cooper's staunch disapproval only thrills Oscar further, who responds enthusiastically, saying that is the kind of attitude that will get him a job at GNN. Cooper yells, "No way!" on his way out, to which Oscar yells back, "You're hired!"

"Grouch Journalism" functions as a way to show young audiences an example of bad journalism, an avenue *Sesame Street* uses to mirror the way the media are often perceived beyond the children's program in the real world. Since *Sesame Street* is an educational show, even when it presents a negative stereotype, it is likely to still be viewed in a positive light. GNN is no exception. This portrayal doesn't inherently connote a negative image of the media in general, because it is done in such a way that the young viewers can understand the implications of GNN and make a distinction between that portrayal and good journalism.

Oscar is the antithesis of Kermit; he is the renegade journalist, an outsider. Ehrlich

describes this type of journalist as one “who in his anger comments on the fakeries, the falsities of society; he holds no particular hope for society’s betterment. He views the world and especially the institutions of government and big business as inherently corrupt. Resolutely independent, he shuns convention and obligation and scorns officially sanctioned truth and morality.”⁶¹

The introduction to the negative images of journalists would seem to prepare young viewers to handle such stereotypes as they outgrow the children’s show, priming them for images that abound in popular culture, ones they will inevitably face — images presented by the likes of Hildy and Walter in *The Front Page*. Outlaws in their own right, they are constantly trying to shirk responsibility and cling to adolescence; they ooze cynicism and distrust civilization and its socially-constructed confines. Oscar telling Anderson Cooper that when you don’t have the information you just make it up is no different from Hildy telling reporters that a journalist is just “a cross between a bootlegger and a whore.”⁶²

And, to give balance to the potentially dreary shadow Oscar could cast over the segment and the viewers’ impression of news, Anderson Cooper portrays good journalistic ability and intent, rejecting the bad habits and intentions of the curmudgeon network.

In addition to Anderson Cooper and references to Diane Sawyer, Dan Rather, and Walter Cronkite, several real-life journalists also appeared on the show, further illustrating the intermingling between reality and fiction. The real-life journalist is never portrayed negatively, but sometimes the characters on *Sesame Street* react to them in a slightly negative way, seeming to be an intentional echoing of the way the media is often perceived in society. The guests usually illustrate positive social concepts and introduce children to the world of news and media in an alternative way to the usual “News Flash.” These cameos also serve to

introduce the program's young audience to real news figures.

Al Roker explains the word "family" to the audience, pointing out how it is a feel-good word for a feel-good concept.⁶³ Candice Bergen lends her voice to the character Murphy Brownbag for a segment she hosts called "Lunch Talk," with Cookie Monster as her guest, discussing what makes a healthy lunch: a peanut butter sandwich, a carrot, the anticipated cookie, and an old sneaker, all of which he eats on air.⁶⁴

More recent episodes still interrupt with a news segment, but replace the trenchcoat clad Kermit with a real-life reporter. Robert MacNeil hosts a special report on "Cookiegate," asking Cookie Monster a series of interrogative questions to expose who ate the missing cookies in a neighbor's home (Kermit is actually on the scene as Cookie Monster's lawyer). Cookie Monster replies to the questions, "That's the problem with the media today! All questions, no cookies!"⁶⁵ His statement, however silly, still parallels an adult exasperation a child might hear about "the media today."

Matt Lauer gets an exclusive interview with Cookie Monster about his decision to eat fruit instead of cookies. When Lauer tells viewers the Cookie Monster is now the Fruit Monster, that he "likes fruit, not cookies," Cookie Monster replies, "No, no, no! No! You members of the media, you blow stories waaaaaay out of proportion. Me still like coooookies! Me still cookie monster!" In fact, he likes anything and everything, even eating Lauer's microphone at the end of the segment.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Sesame Street's positive portrayal of the news media is in sharp contrast to most popular culture depictions. This effect is powerful because once children outgrow the program, they will eventually move on to adult news. A survey in *USA Today* in 2008 revealed that 40

percent of children report watching TV news several times a week, and about one-third read the paper more than once a week; more than half of these young news consumers said they felt angry, sad, or depressed after watching the news. These feelings are not surprising. Although children rely on predictability and routine to foster social skills and thrive academically, news continues to be defined by stories featuring the “strange, odd, extraordinary, bizarre, and abnormal.”⁶⁷ This disparity between their reality and what is portrayed on the news creates negative attitudes toward the media. When coupled with the vast number of off-putting images often seen in movies and on TV, the effect is only further compounded.

Even on *Sesame Street*, there are visible remnants of such negative stereotypes such as the pack reporter, curmudgeon, and renegade reporter. Still, the overall impression of the “news” that reaches *Sesame Street*’s audience can be categorized as positive, largely because of its educational platform. When negative stereotypes are presented, there is context, balance, and comic relief. The repetition of the format creates predictability for children, the relatable content forges a relationship between toddlers and the news, and the easy delivery allows for effortless consumption of material that is both educational and entertaining. Because it slyly played on the modern journalistic figures and situations, as well as contemporary issues, “News Flash” enabled children to think about the stories and information in new ways while providing basic education. Simultaneously, viewers became familiar with the format of news, real-life news personalities, media and societal attitudes toward the media, and the various roles reporters can play in society.

Despite the reinforcement of certain negative stereotypes of the news media, the program itself ultimately created a positive way for children to consume news in a predictable format. The stereotypes in *Sesame Street* are consistent with the images of the journalist in

most television shows and movies, but the educational context allows the reception of these stereotypes to be understood in a positive light.

Still, whether the positive effects of *Sesame Street* can extend beyond those found in Fisch and Truglio's research is largely unknown, and no research points to the long term effects of the "News Flash," specifically. What has happened, it seems, has been a progressive "tuning out" of the news by younger generations, according to media historian and journalism professor David Mindich. He cites research from scholar Wolfram Peiser stating that in 1972 almost half of 18-to-22-year-olds read a newspaper every day; less than 25 percent of that same demographic do so today. Baby boomers of the 1970s consume less news than their parents. Peiser's research points to a more concerning trend: a given age group's reading habits tend to remain consistent over time; as people grow older, their news habits of their younger days do not change much. So the danger is that with each successive age group, there is a general decline in newspaper reading:

In 1972, nearly three-quarters of the 34-to-37 age group read a paper daily. Those thirtysomethings have been replaced by successive crops of thirtysomethings, each reading less than its predecessor. Today, only about a third of this group reads a newspaper every day. This means that fewer parents are bringing home a newspaper or discussing current events over dinner. And fewer kids are growing up in households in which newspapers matter.⁶⁸

Television news has experienced a similar decline, as its demographic creeps up in age and as more young people turn to television primarily for entertainment, watching sitcoms and "reality" TV in lieu of network news, and depending on the Internet for e-mailing, social networking, and games. Mindich offers various reasons for the rift between youth and the news, including the blurring line between entertainment and journalism, estrangement from the political process, skepticism of the news media itself, and, perhaps most interestingly, the

declining sense of community “as Americans are able to live increasingly isolated lives, spending long hours commuting to work and holing up in suburban homes cocooned from the rest of the world.”⁶⁹

As Mindich points out, disengagement from the news and political process puts the health of democracy itself at risk. But the solution isn’t as simple as networks would like to make it; they aren’t going to win the attention of younger generations by competing with reality shows and soap operas. Instead, the appetite for information has to be cultivated and fostered. Interestingly, the approach Mindich calls for is not that different from the original blueprint for *Sesame Street*.

He discusses a group of eighth grade boys he met during his research in New Orleans, calling them “very unlikely consumers of news.” The boys lived in a poor community with an abundance of television and video games. Somehow, they were all reading the *New York Times* online every day. The reason? One of their teachers had assigned them to read the paper when they were in sixth grade, and “the habit stuck.”⁷⁰

Based on his experience with the New Orleans eighth graders, Mindich suggests that print and broadcast news could and should be a bigger part of the school curriculum, proposing the inclusion of a current affairs section on the SAT, a civics test similar to the test given to immigrants trying to establish citizenship for high school seniors, and a requirement that broadcasters “produce a certain amount of children’s news programming in return for their access to the public airwaves.” These are only the most “obvious possibilities” for broadcasters, media conglomerates, editors, reporters, and educators to use in order to regain the public’s trust — specifically, the trust of younger generations — and to reinvigorate the health of public engagement.⁷¹ Mindich’s tactics are noticeably reminiscent of *Sesame Street*’s

doctrine of education and engagement, an approach that could perhaps be revisited with much success today. Perhaps it's time to pick up where the children's show left off.

Appendix:
***Sesame Street* “News Flash” Episode Summaries**

Episode summaries (Sesame Street Workshop 2008); transcripts (Horn, *Tough Pigs Anthology* 2003); videos (viewed from Sesame Street Workshop at Sesamestreet.org or YouTube where indicated). Air dates are earliest known appearances of the skit; some dates are unavailable.

1. *Arabian Nights: Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*: Kermit interviews Ali Baba, who can't seem to figure out the magic word starting with the letter S to open the door to the cave. When Kermit says goodbye to the viewers, he accidentally blurts out “Open Sesame (Street News),” to which the rock opens and forty thieves come out, stealing Kermit's watch and all his clothes.
2. *Ballet: Ballerina's Body*: Kermit points out different parts of ballet dancer Suzanne Farrell's body, and watches her drink a glass of milk.
3. *Cooperation*: Kermit is sent to the park for a report on co-operation, except that there's nobody around to interview. At that moment, monster reporter Telly turns up to conduct the same interview. They end up cooperating by interviewing each other. (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)
4. *Don Music: Old McDonald*: Don Music successfully writes “Old McDonald” with a little help from Kermit and some barnyard animals.
5. *Don Music: Row, Row, Row Your Boat*: With Kermit's help, Don Music manages to rewrite the tune to “Drive, drive, drive your car.”
6. *Don Music: Yankee Doodle*: Kermit helps Don Music finish the “Yankee Doodle” song, then because Don finds the idea of calling feathers macaroni ridiculous, they rewrite it to be a song in which Yankee Doodle stays at home cooking for his pony, puts “fat spaghetti” in a pot and calls it macaroni. Little Chrissy and the Alphabeats then come in and perform the song with Don.
7. *Dr. Nobel Price: Herman the Hoppity-Hop*: It's green, wears a trenchcoat, does news reports ... and it even talks. Dr. Nobel Price has invented an exact mechanical replica of Kermit.
8. *Dr. Nobel Price: Speaking Stick*: Warren Wolf, who is substituting for Kermit, is the first newsperson to witness Dr. Nobel Price's latest invention, a stick that makes your voice sound louder. It bears a striking resemblance to Warren's microphone.
9. *Dr. Nobel Price: The Tinkle Table*: Dr. Nobel Price wants to show off his latest invention, a piano, but it's already been invented. Kermit even knows how to play it.
10. *Fairy Tale: Sleeping Beauty's Kiss*: The prince kisses Sleeping Beauty, but rather than waking her up, falls asleep himself. (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)

11. *Favorite Animals at the Children's Zoo*: At a zoo, Kermit asks the patrons what their favorite animals are. He happens to be standing by a cage with three attention-craving pigs, who desperately assume the mannerisms of each animal mentioned. One pig finally calls the attention of a little boy who apparently loves every animal. As it turns out, the pigs' favorite animal is the frog. Skit opens with Kermit on-cam, but telling jokes to the pigs he is about to interview without realizing he is rolling, as always. "What did one goat say to the other goat? Butt-out!" (Laughter) And, "What did the buck say to the doe? I love you, deaaaarly!" (Laughter) "Oh, hi ho!" as he turns around. He tells the viewers that the question of the day is, what is your favorite animal to watch at the children's zoo ... a kid comes around, and Kermit introduces himself, squeezing in "of Sesame Street News," while he looks into the camera, and then asks the a few kids the question. All the pigs in the background are disappointed because they are saying everything but pigs. Then the pigs ask Kermit to ask them what their favorite animal is; he humors them, and they say frogs, because they hop around, and say ribbit, and are green. Kermit, slightly amused, is about to sign off when one of the pigs asks him to hop around, "just a little." Kermit is hesitant, but can't resist indulging them, and so he hops and says "ribbit," and, mid-hop, says, "Well, you guys have good taste. I'll give you that." (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)

12. *History: George Washington's Father's Cherry Tree*: Kermit interviews the father of George Washington, who is annoyed that George keeps chopping down his cherry trees and then telling the truth about it.¹

13. *Holiday: Santa Claus*: Kermit witnesses how Santa Claus comes down the chimney, but not before a chimney sweep enters the chimney first.

14. *Monsters at School: That is How We Look*: Kermit is at the first day of school for monsters, where the monster teacher and his monster students sing a song about how different they look. At the end of the song, the monster teacher let his students play and Kermit joins them in a game of tag.

15. *Mumford's Big and Small Trick*: The Amazing Mumford has a new trick, where he will make Thumbelina big and The Big Bad Wolf small. He makes Thumbelina big, but doesn't make the wolf smaller — instead, Kermit is the one who shrinks. (Transcripts)

16. *Nursery Rhyme: Little Bo Peep: Part 1*: Kermit encounters a distressed Little Bo Peep, whose sheep is missing. They both observe every sheep that walks by - the first sheep has its tail in front (on its face); the second one has its tail in the middle (on its back), and the third one has no tail. The fourth one does have a tail where it should be: behind. However, this indignant sheep claims to be Mary's little lamb. Kermit tells us to stay tuned for updates on the search for the lost sheep. *Part 2*: Bo Peep has had no luck in finding her sheep; instead she encounters Gladys the Cow pretending to be a sheep, and Fred the Wonder Horse pretending to

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCWaKIqxYUI>

be a dog. Kermit decides to give up on the search, and returns us to our regularly scheduled program.²

17. *Oogle Family*: Although this sketch does not begin with the News Flash logo, Kermit is reporting from a theatre auditorium wearing a tux with his reporter's uniform slung over the seat next to him. In what is described as the musical event of the century, music lovers from around the world have gathered in tribute to the Oogle Family — that is, words that rhyme with “oogle,” such as bugle and googol. The featured piece of music was written by Sir Chrissy Von Koogole and played by Old McDoogole on the bugle, one of the world's foremost concert buglers, who is accompanied by Mr. Cookie Monster, one of the world's finest googlers. Together, they perform “Old McDoogole had a Bugle”, sung to the tune of “Old McDonald had a Farm.” (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)

18. *Rainy Day*: Kermit asks Telly and Juliet how they spend a rainy day. Telly enjoys practicing his bassoon, while Juliet loves to play pretend. Against his will, Kermit gets to play the part of the White Rabbit.

19. *Cinderella: At the Ball*, Episode 0516 Season 4, April 30, 1973: Kermit interviews Cinderella and Prince Charming, who are dancing at the ball. After Cinderella leaves, at midnight, she leaves one glass slipper behind. The prince wants to use it to find Cinderella ... so he can have the other slipper as well. He then accidentally breaks the one he found. “Well, easy come, easy go,” he says.

20. *Fairy Tale: The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, Episode 0519 Season 4 May 3, 1973: The Pied Piper has trouble luring mice with his music — but Kermit lures them by whistling.³

21. *Frog on the Street*, Episode 0536 Season 5 November 19, 1973: Kermit interviews a little girl about the sounds animals make. When he asks her what sound a frog makes, she replies “Wiggit! Wiggit!” which doesn't amuse Kermit.

22. *Nursery Rhyme: Jack and Jill* Episode 0669 Season 6 November 7, 1974: Jack needs someone to go up the hill with him. First he chooses Mervin, then Francine and Gladys the Cow. Finally Jack chooses Jill, who refuses go up the hill with him again, so he asks Kermit to fill in.⁴

23. *Fairy Tale: The Princess and the Cookie*, Episode 0671 Season 6, November 11, 1974: Kermit interviews a servant who tells him that the queen wants to test the maiden by placing a cookie under the mattresses to see if she can feel it. The “princess” (Cookie Monster) not only feels it, but also eats the cookie and the mattresses. (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp4HatIMuOY>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLjPHtQ3dXM>

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLoWt_i1Pd8

24. *The Tortoise and the Hare*, Episode 0676, Season 6 November 18, 1974: Although it didn't feature the "News Flash" logo, Kermit covers the race between the tortoise and the hare for a one-time Sesame Street Sports broadcast, which served as prototype for Sesame Street News. Everything goes smoothly, until the race begins. The hare dawdles, since the tortoise is so slow that the hare will have time to win. Kermit rushes to the finish line so that he can see the results...and is crowned the winner. (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)
25. *Nursery Rhyme: Little Miss Muffet*, Episode 0677, Season 6, November 19, 1974: Kermit meets Little Miss Muffet, who sits on her water bed, eats crunchy granola, and is not afraid of the spider, who ends up frightening Kermit away.⁵
26. *Cinderella: Prince Charming*, Episode 0684 Season 6, November 28, 1974: Kermit interviews Prince Charming, who is looking for Cinderella. The prince tries to see whose foot matches the glass slipper. However, the shoe fits someone unexpected. Kermit: "Boy, these fairy tales are starting to get me down."⁶
27. *Fairy Tale: Mirror, Mirror*, Episode 0685, Season 6, November 29, 1974: The Wicked Witch from the Snow White story plans to fool the mirror into saying that she is the fairest — but she hasn't counted on Kermit hiding behind a curtain. When she sees him, she realizes that he really is pretty good-looking. (Video: Big Bird's Story Time)
28. *Little Red Riding Hood: The Woodsman*, Episode 0691, Season 6, December 9, 1974: Kermit witnesses how the mailman, the salesman and the woodsman knock at the door while the Big Bad Wolf chases Little Red Riding Hood around the bed. Eventually, the Woodsman shows up, and Red and the Wolf chase him for cutting down a maple which was their favorite tree.
29. *Fairy Tale: Rapunzel*, Episode 0692, Season 6, December 10, 1974: Prince Charming arrives to rescue the princess in the tower, and Kermit asks what his plan is, but he refuses to tell. He yells at Kermit to be quiet, and just as he begins reciting the nursery rhyme, he notices Kermit talking to the camera about the plan and says, "Frog!" and then Kermit apologizes for interrupting and the prince goes back to wooing the princess to let down her long hair. The princess can't hear him, and even though he is yelling at the top of his lungs, she finally hears him, and lets it down, but it's a wig so it all falls to the ground. Now she is bald and he has no hair to climb. Kermit tries to sign off but the ensuing chaos distracts him, and the music comes on over his voice, cutting away.
30. *Weather Report*, Episode 0693, Season 6: Simon Soundman does a weather report using sounds for different kinds of weather. News anchorman Kermit fires him and calls for another weatherman, who has a more "visual" approach to reporting the weather.

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnkaW4oU3IQ>

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuUxpEHTdL8>

31. *Nursery Rhyme: Hey Diddle Diddle*, Episode 0694: In a take on the “Hey Diddle Diddle” nursery rhyme, Kermit interviews Natalie the cow and her cat manager as she prepares to jump over the moon. Natalie plans to break the usual cow stereotype by doing this jump. After the cat plays a fanfare on his fiddle, she makes the jump and crash lands back to Earth, where she is praised.

32. *Nursery Rhyme: Old Mother Hubbard*, Episode 0696: Kermit is talking to someone off-camera again, this time telling jokes. Whistling, he says, “That’s my Bob White; and now you wanna hear my swallow? (imitates a bird); and uh, here’s duck (ducks down out of frame and back up),” then realizes he is on. He says, “Oh! Ah! Kermit the Frog with Sesame Street News, here. And today we’re reporting on that old nursery rhyme, Old Mother Hubbard.” He is shooting this stand-up live, inside the woman’s house, and just as he is explaining the nursery rhyme, which in its traditional form “doesn’t rhyme very well,” in comes Mother Hubbard with her dog. She goes to the cupboard which is in fact bare, and then tries to console her dog, all the while unaware that a news crew is in her kitchen. Kermit approaches to ask her a question, and the woman, clearly startled, comes back with several things that rhyme with bone — a phone, a throne, a stone — and as Kermit reports that these things do indeed rhyme, but they are not what the dog wants.

Then the dog gets on the phone, in perfect English, and orders Chinese Takeout. He asks the frog to stay for lunch. Kermit signs off, “Returning you now to the regularly scheduled programming.” The old lady falls out of frame, the dog says to the take-out person on the other end of the line, “Make that one less eggroll,” to which Kermit says, “I can eat her part.”

33. *Don Music: Mary Had a Bicycle*, Episode 0698: Don Music tries to write “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” but he can’t come up with a word that rhymes with “snow.” Kermit suggests that Don try another angle, which leads to Don writing the hit song “Mary Had a Bicycle.” Don sings the song, with back-up vocals from the Monotones. (Sing Yourself Silly, Old School, Vol. 2)

34. *History: Christopher Columbus*, Episode 0700: Kermit interviews Christopher Columbus before he begins his voyage to discover America. Kermit tries to tell him that the third ship is tied to the dock, but it’s too late — the dock breaks free, and takes Kermit along with the ship.⁷

35. *The Three Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf: The Pig’s Straw House*, Episode 0702, Season 6, December 24, 1974: Kermit interviews one of the Three Little Pigs, the one who built a straw house. The Big Bad Wolf comes to blow it down, but the house is actually strong. (Transcript)

36. *Nursery Rhyme: Humpty Dumpty*, Episode 0705, Season 6, December 27, 1974: Sirens, commotion, etc. with Humpty on the wall at the scene of the crisis. Kermit is a frantic reporter “recapitulating” the story: “As you may remember, Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall ...” etc., as he recites the nursery rhyme. “Wait a minute, there’s one of the king’s cows, I believe it is

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXtF3ljgVTk>

supposed to be just the king's horses, here," as he shoos away the cow who neighs and pretends to be a horse, to interview the actual horse.

Kermit employs the most reporter-like voice inflection and language — he uses phrases like “speaking to you from the scene of the accident” and “matter-a-fact, if you look back there now, you can see they have the bottom and middle parts together,” and “well folks, as you can see,” and “we're gonna get a word in with one of the king's horses now.” He speaks frantically like a real reporter on the scene would do. He always identifies himself “Kermit the Frog here with Sesame Street News” asking, “how does it feel to have it all together again?” Just then, Kermit gives him a congratulatory slap on the back, and knocks him off the wall, breaking him all over again. The crew rushes in again, and as Kermit is apologizing, they yell to “get the frog outa here!” Kermit, blamed for the incident, epitomizes the image of the nuisance reporter who messes things up and just makes more work for the authorities, who are doing their jobs properly.

37. *Nursery Rhyme: Hickory Dickory Dock*, Episode 0710, Season 6 January 3, 1975: Kermit is unaware that filming has begun: “Do you have the time? Oh! Hi ho there clock-lovers, this is Kermit the Frog for Sesame Street News.”

38. *Fairy Tale: Sleeping Beauty*, Episode 0713: Kermit is facing backwards again, and starts his stand-up as usual, with “OH, hi there, Kermit the Frog here for Sesame Street News, and today I am at the bedside of the world famous Sleeping Beauty.” Kermit proceeds to explain that she has been asleep for 100 years, referring to the audience as “folks.”

39. *Nursery Rhyme: Jack Be Nimble*, Episode 0723, Season 6, January 22, 1975: The voiceover begins with a slight deviation from the usual script: “And now for another fast-breaking news story, we go to now to our roving reporter, Kermit the Frog.”

Kermit: “I'm getting pretty tired of all this roving, too ... OH! Hi Ho! Kermit the Frog here, and I'm standing next to a candlestick which may give you some clue as to which fast-breaking news story we're here to report on. Jack is there, and Kermit explains his duties. Jack goes UNDER the candlestick, and Kermit says, “That was wrong. That was wrong. What you did was Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack duck under the candlestick. That's no good.”

Jack goes for round 2, this time he runs around the candle. Jack tells Kermit to get off his case, but Kermit says, “Listen, Jack, if you wanna work in a world-famous nursery rhyme you gotta do it right.” Jack does it properly, but he complains about his broken bones, and then walks off with a cow who is saying, “If you think that is bad, you should try jumping over the moon. Kermit signs off, “We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming,” and remarks to someone off camera: “These nursery rhymes get weirder and weirder every time ... Weird. Weird!”

40. *Fairy Tale: Rumpelstiltskin*, Episode 0724, Season 6, January 23, 1975: Trench coat-clad Kermit peers around a corner with a hand-held microphone and states his location and story. Kermit uses the same leading questions and language as he does in each “News Flash,”

mirroring the typical news reporter to convey the story to the viewers. He implores viewers to call and assist the emperor's daughter via a hotline: "If anyone has any information regarding the name of Rumpelstiltskin...", etc. Crazy viewers call in with the wrong information, anonymously, and Kermit gets mixed up and taken by Rumpelstiltskin when he decides to hide in the baby carriage. He gets mistaken for the woman's baby and viewers are left with Kermit yelling, "Unhand me!" to no avail." The infamous Rumpelstiltskin rolls him out in the baby carriage, giving no authority to his claims.

41. *The Three Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf: Five Little Pigs*, Episode 0737, Season 6, February 11, 1975: Kermit tries to tell the story of the Three Little Pigs, but five pigs show up. He realizes he's encountered the wrong group of Pigs — one of these Pigs went to market, and one stayed home. Just as he's got things straight, the Big Bad Wolf shows up, and huffs and puffs Kermit away.

42. *Man in Snowstorm*, Episode 0750, Season 6, February 28, 1975: "Part 1: Kermit has received a phone call which tells him that there is someone who has been standing out in a terrible snow storm for a long time. Kermit asks everyone who passes by, "Are you that person?" But everyone he asks has been out in the snow for only a short time. Kermit refuses to give up, however, and tells us to stay tuned. Part 2: Kermit, now shivering a little, is still looking for the person who's been standing out in the snow for a long time. He even asks Farley, too. Still no success yet. Part 3: Kermit is now buried up to his neck in snow, colder than ever. He calls the attention of passerby Harvey Kneeslapper, who tells Kermit that he is the one who made the call, which was a prank call. As it turns out, Kermit was the one standing out in the storm."⁸

43. *The Three Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf: The Count Counts the Three Little Pigs*, Episode 0758, Season 6, March 12, 1975: Kermit's interview with the Three Little Pigs is interrupted by the Count, who wants to count them. When he counts the pigs, thunder and lightning crash, and the pigs, thinking it's going to rain, go inside and refuse to be interviewed. When the Count's counting puts an end to the interview, Kermit goes to interview the residents of the next house ... the Seven Dwarves. (Sesamestreet.org)

44. *Holiday Mix-Up*, Episode 0777, Season 6, April 8, 1975: Kermit interviews Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and a witch — they are all confused about who they are and what holidays they belong in. Online: Sesamestreet.org

45. *What Makes People Angry?* Episode 0869, Season 7, March 11, 1976:

Announcer: "We take you now to Kermit the Roving Reporter, and his people-on-the-street interview" (this is a departure from the usual announcement) as we cut to Kermit, talking to an off-camera officer, explaining who he's reporting for, "Sesame Street, it's a kids' program ...

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCMuuXsTe5E>

Oh, uh ... SHH! This is, uh, Kermit the Frog here, Sesame Street News, and today we are out on the street and we are going to find out what makes the average man on the street angry.”

Just then he stops a woman, and asks her, “Excuse me, miss, can you tell me, what is it that makes you angry?” “No, I don’t have time, I’m on my way to a ping pong tournament.” She runs along.

A man comes by, Kermit asks him the same question, but the man says, sorry, he doesn’t have time because he is going to a party. Kermit is looking defeated, but a kid comes along, and before Kermit can even get the whole question out, the kid says, “Sorry, I’m late for the game, so long!” Kermit looks directly into the camera with his scrunched face of frustration and lets out a frustrated, but stifled, yell. Two more people, including his friend Grover, pass by, only to blow him off for lack of time. One lady says, “I already have one, thank you,” hurriedly assuming this is a sales frog and not a reporter.

Another frustrated mumble out of Kermit, and he yells, “Cut! Cut! I’ve had it!” While he is ranting on and on, a man stops and asks, “Are you angry?” Kermit says, “Yes! I’m angry and would you like to know why?” The man apologizes and says he has no time. Kermit explodes and yells into the camera to sign off: “This is Kermit the ANGRY Frog reporting and would you like to know why I’m angry?! I’ll tell you why I’m angry!” Just then the cheerful voiceover returns, “That’s all the time we have today with Kermit the Frog,” and Kermit is a talking (screaming) head going ballistic with no sound as the screen fades to black.

46. *Fairy Tale: Pinocchio*, Episode 0878, Season 7, March 24, 1976: Logo with voiceover: “We take you now” Kermit is on-camera talking to a camera man about the shot: “Better get a wide shot because his nose is long and we don’t wanna blow it — the picture, not the nose.” Shortly, he realizes they are rolling and gets into his reporter character. Pinocchio is a hard-to-get world-famous celebrity that Kermit must report on, but Pinocchio is looking for air-time and keeps going with lies to show off and grow his nose. He ends up physically pushing Kermit out of the picture with his lengthening nose. Reporter has no real control over the subject of the interview. Kermit eventually falls out of the sky because he begs Pinocchio to shorten his nose, which he does, but this leaves Kermit hanging in mid-air with nothing. (Sesame Street Workshop 2008)

47. *Arabian Nights: Aladdin and His Lamp*, Episode 0927, Season 8, November 30, 1976: Aladdin is distressed that his lamp won’t work until Kermit informs him that he needs to add a light bulb, plug in the cord, and turn the switch. All the while, the Genie wisecracks about his job and trying to get some sleep inside a lamp.

48. *Fairy Tale: Princess Chooses a Prince*, Episode 0952, Season 8: A princess says that the one she has chosen to be her prince has bulgy eyes, small ears, and a funny voice, is wearing a hat and coat .. and is a frog. Kermit is the only one who fits that description, so she kisses him, thinking he’ll become a prince. In a puff of smoke, she turns into a frog. Kermit invites her to “the hop” and she accepts.

49. *The Six Dollar Man*, Episode 1141, Season 9, March 27, 1978: Kermit explores the lab of Professor Nucleus Von Fission, who has just built a robot called the Six Dollar Man, out of parts which cost him six dollars total. The robot destroys the lab, while Von Fission laughs. Kermit is horrified, but Von Fission explains, “What do you expect for six dollars?”
50. *Fairy Tale: The Elves and the Shoemaker*, Episode 1316, Season 11, November 26, 1979: Kermit interviews the elves, who give the shoemaker various gifts that are not shoes, but rather things that rhyme with “shoe.”
51. *Nursery Rhyme: Peter Piper’s Family*, Episode 1563, Season 12, May 6, 1981: Kermit goes to Peter Piper’s Pickled Peppers Patch to interview Peter Piper, but he only gets to meet other members of his family, whose names all begin with a common letter.
52. *Nursery Rhyme: The Old Woman Who Lives in a Shoe Episode*, 1836, Season 15, November 21, 1983: Kermit looks for the Old Woman who Lives in a Shoe. At first he ends up visiting The Young Man who Lives in a Glove and the Young Woman who Lives in a Hat. When he reaches the shoe, it turns out the old woman needs a babysitter for her kids, and what better candidate than Kermit?
53. *Don Music: Can You Tell Me How To Get To Yellowstone Park?* Episode 1845, Season 15, December 2, 1983: Don Music tries to rewrite the “Sesame Street Theme“ on a stormy night. He succeeds with the help of Kermit and is joined by Little Chrissy and the Alphabeats.
54. *Nursery Rhyme: Mary and Her Little Lamb*, Episode 2059, Season 16, March 28, 1985: After an interview with Mary, the lamb follows Kermit the Frog.
55. *The Three Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf: How the Three Little Pigs Feel*, Episode 2096, Season 17, November 18, 1985.
56. *Don Music: Whistle, Whistle, Little Bird*, Episode 2164, Season 17, February 20, 1986: Don Music tries to rewrite “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” He succeeds and is joined by a country-western band.
57. *Ideas for Games*, Episode 2228, Season 18, November 19, 1986: Kermit interviews Elmo about his new game idea as he explains that an idea is something that exists in the mind, and that he is interested in people’s new ideas. Elmo says he does have an idea for a game — he wants to play “reporter game” and tries to take Kermit’s microphone, playfully saying to the audience: “This is Elmo for Sesame Street News. Haha.” Kermit is frustrated with losing control over the interview, and attempts to get back his microphone. He is yanked off screen.
58. *Dr. Nobel Price: The Great Poonga-Poonga*, Episode 2258, Season 18, December 31, 1986: Dr. Nobel Price reveals his latest captured creature, which turns out to be a live rabbit.
59. *Ballet: Counting Battements*, Episode 2291, Season 18, February 16, 1987: Kermit and Grover watch Suzanne to 20 grand battements

60. *Alice in Wonderland Episode*, 2313, Season 18, March 18, 1987: Kermit interviews Alice, from the Lewis Carroll tales. For this adventure, she drinks a beverage that makes her grow. Then Kermit eats a cupcake that causes him to shrink.

61. *London Fog*, Episode 2404, Season 19, January 21, 1988: In London, Kermit tries to talk about the London Fog, but is interrupted by the London Frog, a Grenadier Guardsman carrying “The Famous London Log,” and a London Hog. By the time Kermit is ready to talk, the Fog has evaporated, and the others gather around to dance the London Clog.

62. *Old McDonald: Spaceship*, Episode 2448, Season 19, March 23, 1988: “News Flash” Logo flashes as Kermit is talking to the pig prior to doing his stand-up. Once he realizes cameras are rolling, Kermit introduces the story: “This is the very farm made famous by the rhyme, ‘Old McDonald had a farm, ee-i—ee-i—oh.’” McDonald is filling in the blanks, as he is present for an interview. Kermit points out his “unusual accent” and establishes that he is Scottish. Kermit says McDonald has a very big surprise, and says he has a spaceship. Kermit says, “Well, Old McDonald has a farm and a reported space ship, but I, of course have not seen it” (alluding to a reporter’s need for objectivity and healthy skepticism). Then Kermit asks Old McDonald to describe the spaceship; just as he is describing a “red disk that flies,” a dog pops into frame carrying a red Frisbee in his mouth, and McDonald yells, “There it is!” Kermit says that it’s a Frisbee; disappointed, he asks, “We came all the way out here to see a Frisbee?!” It is another disappointing, false lead for Kermit the reporter. Just as McDonald leaves and Kermit is alone on camera, something comes in from the sky. Aliens come out of a real spaceship singing and Kermit gets caught in a melee of the singing Yip Yap Martians doing an alien rendition of “Eee I Eee I Ohhhh” song.

63. *Don Music: The Alphabet Song Episode*, 2475, Season 19, May 5, 1988: Don Music successfully “writes” the Alphabet Song, with help from his surroundings including Kermit.⁹

64. *Little Red Cookie Hood*, Episode 2487, Season 20, November 22, 1988: Kermit starts his stand-up facing away from the camera by mistake as usual, then turns around to speak to camera and state his location, his story, etc. “Little Red Riding Hood should be here any moment now, and we are hoping for an exclusive look at that basket of goodies and we’re gonna find out what’s inside the basket.” Riding Hood (Cookie Monster) comes in, alarmed that Kermit may be a wolf in frog clothing; he assures her that no he is Kermit the Frog, and turns to camera to say “of Sesame Street News” and tells her they are here for an “inside peek” at the basket’s contents. She says, for Sesame Street News? SURE!

Kermit goes close into the camera to speak to audience, saying, “This is an exciting moment as Little Red Riding Hood goes inside to reveal what’s inside the basket.” Just then, Little Red asks who is he talking to. Kermit tries to explain, but she says never mind and goes on to show that there are only cookies in the basket to make her sick grandma feel better.

⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er_dJDAPU0

Kermit is again disappointed, but this time it's because there is no chicken soup; he goes on to explain that when people are sick, they want healthy things like chicken soup and fresh vegetables (functioning here as a truth conveyer, educator, etc.)

Ever the reporter, Kermit goes on to see if he can get an interview with the granny, too; the wolf answers the door, dressed as Dr. Wolf, and Kermit flees, saying "Let's just forget the granny story."

Granny comes to the door: "Who was that?"

Wolf: "Oh, just some frog from Sesame Street News." Here, the wolf is adopting the familiar tone of contempt for pesky reporters.

65. *Little Red Riding Hood: Directions*, Episode 2503, Season 20 December 14, 1988: Kermit, using a pull-down map, tries to give Little Red Riding Hood directions to her grandmother's house. But she seems preoccupied with brushing lint from her red cloak. In the end, Red joins her grandmother, the Big Bad Wolf, and a cab driver for a picnic.

66. *History: The Boston Tea ("T") Party*, Episode 2574, Season 20 March 23, 1989: Kermit is looking around for the camera, and when he finds it, "Hi ho, Kermit the Frog with Sesame Street News with Great Moments in History," he says, adding: "The year? 1773. The place? The BOSTON HARBOR! And WE ... ARE ... HERE!!!!!" He yells this into the sky, thrilled to be reporting from a moment in history, not a fairytale, just as a man walks by.

67. *The Invisible Man*, Episode 2604, Season 20 May 4, 1989: Kermit interviews the Invisible Man, who tap dances for him, and later introduces his family which crowds Kermit. All that is seen of the Invisible Man and his kin are their hats.¹⁰

68. *Alphabet Mine*, Episode 2612, Season 20, May 16, 1989: Kermit the Frog reports from an alphabet mine where they dig Js. The miners tell him various words that begin with J and Richard presents him with his own J. (Later reruns of this sketch had banjo music added in the background.)

69. *Monsters at School: What Monsters Want to Be When They Grow Up*, Episode 2613, Season 20, May 17, 1989: Kermit, doing a "slow-breaking human interest story," asks monsters at a daycare center what they want to be when they grow up, and every time they tell him, he rewards them with a cookie. Cookie Monster, posing as a baby ("Cry cry cry, sniffle sniffle sniffle"), claims he wants to be an orthodontist. However, Kermit gets wise to Cookie's scheme, and instead rewards him with a wind-up toy pair of false teeth.

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G9stWsmZ8c>

70. *Fairy Tale: Jack and the Beanstalk*, Episode 2617, Season 20, November 14, 1989: Kermit is coming to viewers live, from the beanstalk itself, climbing up to his exclusive interview with Jack to discuss the goose that laid the golden egg, the magic harp, and the one other thing he can't remember just yet. Kermit is struggling to climb and report simultaneously, and a man coming down the stalk tells him that Jack isn't up there anymore. "You must be Jack," Kermit says. He's right. Jack advises him not to keep going up, but Kermit replies, "Sesame Street News never blows a story, and I can still talk to the goose that lays the golden egg, or the harp that sings, or that third thing, I can't remember what that was." Kermit emerges from a cloud to the top, and hears the infamous fe-fi-fo-fum and remembers the "third thing" was a giant, and he signs off quickly: "We return you quickly to regularly scheduled programming as I make my way down the beanstalk! Down, down!"

71. *Miami Mice*, Episode 2640, Season 21, December 15, 1989: Kermit appeared in his reporter persona in a Miami Mice sketch (which used the regular Miami Mice intro instead of the "News Flash" logo). Kermit tries to interview the mice about adventure (probably for another news program other than Sesame Street News), but finds it difficult to do so when he's interrupted by a jet plane, an animal stampede, and a giant monster all making their way through the office.¹¹

72. *Monsters at School: The First Day of School*, Kermit Episode 2682, Season 21, February 13, 1990: reassures kindergarten student Cookie Monster that there's no need to be afraid on the first day of school. As Kermit is about to leave, the teacher mistakes him for a student and tells him to sit down.

73. *The Three Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf: The Big Bad Wolf's School for Huffing and Puffing*, Episode 2691, Season 21, February 26, 1990: The wolf teaches Kermit how to huff and puff like him. The wolf tests Kermit's blowing skills by having him move three ping pong balls by taking a deep breath and then blow them away with his mouth. Next, the wolf wants Kermit to blow down a straw house, but Kermit can't do it. On the third try, the wolf secretly helps him by blowing on the house and they both blow the straw off a monster couple's house. The wolf congratulates Kermit on his great job at blowing, but now Kermit has to deal with the monster couple, who are not very pleased with what just happened.

74. *Cinderella: Fairy Godmother*, Episode 2749, Season 22, November 15, 1990: Cinderella's Fairy Godmother tries to make a beautiful ball dress appear on Cinderella without success. The gown ends up on Kermit instead.

75. *Fairy Tale: Seven Emotional Dwarves*, Episode 2787, Season 22, January 8, 1991: Kermit meets the Seven Dwarves, seemingly from the Snow White story. However, in this version, each is named after (and represents) an emotion. (Kermit ad-libs: "Hey Dulcy, we got the wrong dwarves again!") They are named Cheerful, Sad, Lovey, Angry, Proud, Surprised, and Fearful.

¹¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5K8Er_eq68

76. *Nursery Rhyme: Old King Cole*, Episode 2887, Season 23, November 26, 1991: Kermit witnesses as Old King Cole calls for his pipe and bowl (both of which he rejects), followed by his fiddlers three (along with a drummer, a saxophone player, and a bass player).¹²

77. *The Tortoise and the Hare's Rematch*, Episode 3056, Season 24, January 18, 1993: The hare challenges The Tortoise to a rematch: this time, the Tortoise comes equipped with a jet-pack.

78. *The Three Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf: The New Three Little Pigs Story*, Episode 3080, Season 24, February 19, 1993: The Big Bad Wolf plays a game of "Three of These Things" with Kermit and the pigs. Since Kermit doesn't belong with the pigs, the wolf blows him out of the picture. (Sesamestreet.org)

79. *Waiting in Line*, Episode 3093, Season 24, March 10, 1993: Kermit talks to people waiting in line for a football game being held at the SuperGame Stadium

80. *Old McDonald: Health Farm*, Episode 3094, Season 24, March 11, 1993: Old MacDonald opens a health resort for his animals.

81. *History: The First Day of School in History*, Episode 3114, Season 24, April 8, 1993: Kermit goes back in time to witness the very first day of school, taught by a caveman teacher (Mr. Moses) with caveman students (such as Oog, Argh, and Runk). Today the students learn about the letter N. The teacher presents a stone carved N to Kermit ... which accidentally lands on his flipper.

82. *They Live in Different Places, But They Both Love Me*, Episode 3118, Season 24, April 14, 1993: Kermit interviews a bird who sings about how her parents still love her even though they don't live together anymore (though it is not directly stated whether her parents are divorced or separated).

83. *Fairy Tale: The Princess and the C*, Episode 3120, Season 24, April 16, 1993: Instead of a pea, this princess sleeps on things beginning with C.¹³

84. (No known episode number) Kermit Interviews the Three Little Pigs about emotions.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVaRaXEiDd4>

¹³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqVziqgtgZQ>

Endnotes

¹ Joe Saltzman, "Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture: a Unique Method of Studying the Public's Perception of Its Journalists and the News Media," *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, 2005, <<http://ijpc.org/uploads/files/AEJMC%20Paper%20San%20Antonio%20Saltzman%202005.pdf>> (accessed December 1, 2010).

² Shalom M. Fisch, Rosemarie T. Truglio, and Charlotte F. Cole, "The Impact of *Sesame Street* on Preschool Children: A Review and Synthesis of 30 Years' Research," *Media Psychology* 1 (1999): 165.

³ Bruce Biossat, "T.V.'s Educational Breakthrough: Sesame Street 'Must' for Tots," *The Owosso Argus-Press*, November 14, 1969, 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shalom M. Fisch and Rosemarie T. Truglio, eds., *G is for Growing: 30 Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Judith Van Evra, *Television and Child Development* (Hillsdale, N.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990), 49.

⁹ See Fisch and Truglio, *G is for Growing*.

¹⁰ Muppet Wiki, "Sesame Street News Flash," <http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Sesame_Street> (accessed December 2, 2010).

¹¹ Fisch and Truglio, *G is for Growing*, 13.

¹² See, for example, Charles K. Atkin, "Broadcast News Programming and the Child Audience," *Journal of Broadcasting* 22:1 (1978): 47-61; Stacy L. Smith and Barbara L. Wilson, "Children's Comprehension of and Fear Reactions to Television News," *Media Psychology* 4 (2002): 1-26; Cynthia Hoffner and Margaret J. Haefner, "Children's News Interest during the Gulf War: The Role of Negative Affect," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 38:2 (1994): 193-204.

¹³ See Van Evra, *Television and Child Development*.

¹⁴ Stacy L. Smith, Katherine M. Pieper, and Emily J. Moyer-Guse, “News, Reality Shows, and Children’s Fears: Examining Content Patterns, Theories, and Negative Effects,” in *The Handbook of Children, Media and Development*, eds. Sandra L. Calvert and Barbara J. Wilson (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2008), 215.

¹⁵ See Hoffner and Haefner, “Children’s News Interest during the Gulf War: The Role of Negative Affect.”

¹⁶ See Smith, Pieper and Moyer-Guse, “News, Reality Shows, and Children’s Fears.”

¹⁷ Segment: “Breaking News: Tortoise vs. Hare” (see full transcript in Appendix).

¹⁸ See Muppet Wiki, “Sesame Street News Flash.”

¹⁹ Saltzman, “Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture,” 27.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Most sketches began with a logo and “News Flash” written over a cloud with stars and a lightning bolt against a black background. The theme song, written by Joe Raposo (registered with BMI as “Kermit News Theme”), was composed of the trademark Morse code-like sounds with an urgent sounding adaptation of the *Sesame Street* theme and the announcer (Jerry Nelson’s voice) usually saying, “We take you now to Kermit the Frog with another fast-breaking news story!” The colors on the logo occasionally varied; one version had it in black and white, and it would sometimes be superimposed over footage with Kermit talking with someone off-camera, usually with a basic color scheme. In the mid-1980s segments, the “News Flash” text would flicker on and off. A few of the segments originally did not begin with a logo or announcer. One known early segment had an alternate logo with a title card that read “news bulletin” in large, white lowercase letters over a blue screen. See Muppet Wiki, “Sesame Street News Flash.”

²² Howard Good, “Introduction,” in *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies*, ed. Howard Good (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 5.

²³ Episode 0878, Season 7, March 24, 1976.

²⁴ Episode 0705, Season 6, December 27, 1974.

²⁵ Episode 0710, Season 6 January 3, 1975.

²⁶ Alex Barris, *Stop the Presses! The Newspaperman in American Films* (New York, A.S. Barnes, 1976), 78.

²⁷ Sandra L. Borden, "Responsible Journalistic Inquiry: *The Paper*," in *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies*, ed. Howard Good, (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 10.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Episode 2613, Season 20, May 17, 1989.

³⁰ See Joe Saltzman, "Sob Sisters: The Image of the Female Journalist in Popular Culture," *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, 2003, <<http://www.ijpc.org/uploads/files/sobsessay.pdf>> (accessed December 1, 2010).

³¹ Kermit News Flash, Daycare, Season 20, May 20, 1989; Muppet Wiki, "Sesame Street News Flash."

³² Episode 0869, Season 7, March 11, 1976.

³³ Ibid. This segment did not start with the "News Flash" title card, but featured the usual theme music at the beginning and end of the sketch, with the announcer referring to Kermit as the "reporter on the street."

³⁴ Loren Ghiglione and Joe Saltzman, "Fact or Fiction: Hollywood Looks at the News," *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, 2005, <<http://ijpc.org/hollywoodloksatthenews2.pdf>> (accessed December 1, 2010).

³⁵ Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 32.

³⁶ Ibid., 34 and 74.

³⁷ Ibid., 175.

³⁸ Barris, *Stop the Presses!*, 20.

³⁹ Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*, 55.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Episode 0713, Season 6, January 8, 1975.

⁴² Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*, 48.

⁴³ Maxwell Taylor Courson, *The Newspaper Movies: An Analysis of the Rise and Decline of the News Gatherer as a Hero in American Motion Pictures, 1900-1974* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1976), 88 and 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 87-91.

⁴⁶ Episode 0750, Season 6, February 28, 1975, Part 1.

⁴⁷ “News Flash: Favorite Animals”; no earliest-known air date available. See Muppet Wiki, “Sesame Street News Flash.”

⁴⁸ Episode 2228, Season 18, November 19, 1986.

⁴⁹ Saltzman, “Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture,” 33.

⁵⁰ See Loren Ghiglione, “The American Journalist: Fiction versus Fact,” *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, 1991, <<http://www.ijpc.org/uploads/files/ghiglione.pdf>> (accessed December 1, 2010).

⁵¹ Ghiglione and Saltzman, “Fact or Fiction: Hollywood Looks at the News,” 16.

⁵² Episode 2096, Season 17, November 18, 1985.

⁵³ Ghiglione, “The American Journalist,” 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁵ See Fisch, Truglio, and Cole, “The Impact of *Sesame Street* on Preschool Children.”

⁵⁶ Howard Good, *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* (Metuchen, NJ.: Scarecrow, 1989), 9.

⁵⁷ Season 38, episode # unknown, October 16, 2007.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ “Anderson Cooper Reports on the Letter ‘G,’” <http://www.sesamestreet.org/video_player/-/pgpv/videoplayer/0/86730c18-154b-11dd-8ea8-a3d2ac25b65b> (accessed December 2, 2010).

⁶¹ Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*, 8.

⁶² Ibid., 34.

⁶³ Youtube, *Sesame Street*: Al Roker: Family, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvqDqzLdU_U> (accessed December 2, 2010).

⁶⁴ Youtube, *Sesame Street*: Murphy Brownbag with Cookie and Murphy Brown, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmZJMhbX7X8>> (accessed December 2, 2010).

⁶⁵ Youtube, *Sesame Street*: MacNeil Report, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6W6fG1FGpM>> (accessed December 2, 2010).

⁶⁶ Youtube, *Sesame Street*: Matt Lauer Interviews Cookie Monster, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WY8jr_qdQLs> (accessed December 2, 2010).

⁶⁷ Joe Saltzman, "Kids See the Darndest Things" *USA Today Magazine*, November 2008, 61.

⁶⁸ David T.Z. Mindich, "The Collapse of Big Media: The Young and the Restless," *Wilson Quarterly* 29.2 (2005): 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*