The Muppet for Loyalties: The power and flow of international *Sesame Street* co-productions.

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Précis

More than 35 years ago *Sesame Street* began its global proliferation. Today, in excess of 120 productions or co-productions of the series in various formats and languages are being produced internationally. This makes *Sesame Street* the largest single educator in the world – a formidable accomplishment and a powerful one at that. Are the Muppets and their messages of literacy, numeracy, and tolerance as innocent as Big Bird seems? Or, are political intentions hidden beneath eight feet of bright yellow feathers? How does a children’s program that is, arguably, the most influential in television history, find its way onto international airwaves? Is its arrival met with open arms? Or, when a television program that has established itself as a powerhouse of ideology ventures into territories outside its cultural norm do the governments of these nations feel the Muppets are something they must regulate? This paper seeks to examine the export of *Sesame Street* to broadcasters and their child viewers around the globe by placing the co-production experience within the Market for Loyalties model.
Introduction

*Sesame Street* may be the most researched television program in the history of the medium. The body of literature examining the series has established that its didactic influence is considerable. Since its inception in 1969 it has been studied for its social and academic impact (Fisch, Truglio & Cole, 1999) and has provided a platform for our understanding of not only how we watch television (Anderson & Burns, 1991) but also how we can learn from it (Ball & Bogatz, 1971; Reiser, Williamson & Suzuki, 1988; Rice, Huston, Truglio & Wright, 1990). *Sesame Street* has been found to successfully impart literacy and numeracy information (Fisch, Truglio & Cole, 1999; Rice, Huston, Trulio & Wright, 1990) and support a child’s school readiness and early academic skills (Linebarger, 2004; Wright, Huston, Murphy, St. Peters, Pinon, Scantlin et al., 2001) with long-term benefits reaching well into adolescence (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger & Wright, 2001). The show offers racial communion, moral values, and the sights, sounds and attitudes of inner-city neighbourhoods across the United States (Lewis, 1992). It has taken on the topic of divorce, birth, and war (Russell, 2006). Moreover, away from the television screen, it has become a marketing phenomenon with books, toys, games and interactive media products which are not simply popular but, in the case of one plush toy, have also been a cause for consumer mayhem¹.

While the program’s edifying impact is, at this point, almost beyond question, research on *Sesame Street*’s contributions to child development has not been limited to that of academic achievements. There is a smaller body of literature which has

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¹ In 1996 Sesame Workshop’s toy division released *Tickle Me Elmo* a battery operated plush toy of the *Sesame Street* character, just in time for the holiday rush. Sales went wild, and consumers wilder as the cheerful red Muppet flew off the shelves. Parents were in fist fights at store counters and paying exorbitant sums to find the gift that every child wanted that Christmas.
investigated the program’s ability to influence social and cultural behaviour\textsuperscript{2}. That research has, for the most part, examined the international co-productions. Shows such as *Alam Simsim* in Egypt have been found to break down gender stereotypes, *Takaliani Sesame* in South African is helping children cope with the stigma of HIV, and *Rechov Sumsum – Shara Simsim* the Israeli/Palestinian production has resulted in increased racial tolerance, increased use of positive attributes toward others, and prosocial justifications for the resolution of conflict (Fisch, Truglio & Cole, 1999; Lee, 2006).

Considering all of this, it might seem logical that broadcasters internationally should buy it up, change nothing, and broadcast at-will with their children reaping the seemingly non-stop rewards. Yet, while *Sesame Street* airs in more than 100 nations around the globe, the American version is not always the program of choice for international broadcasters. Rather, some very serious deliberation occurs well before the Muppets take to the screen. It seems these purveyors of goodwill, peace, and academics are finding themselves embroiled in politics as well.

Price (1994), in his Market for Loyalties model, suggests that within the global communication system a market exists in which regulation of media is used in a struggle between influential actors (i.e., government, business) for audience allegiance. He goes on to say, in this day of globalization powerful market participants are reaching well beyond their own national boundaries and are having influence on issues as intimately tied to borders as national identity and culture. *Sesame Street*’s international co-productions may be an archetype of this battle – the quest for loyalty taking place in the realm of media content, and the allegiance being sought that of the preschooler.

\textsuperscript{2} The body of research which exists on the social and cultural impact of the series has been sponsored by the Workshop and its affiliates.
The producers of international Sesame Street productions consistently negotiate the push and pull of ideology, corporation, and government as they continue their steady Muppet-march around the globe. Indeed, adaptations to Sesame Street have been, from time to time, the rope in a political tug-o’-war for the consciousness of the child audience.

Arguing that children’s television is as political a public dominion as other media environments, this paper examines the role of governments and other actors (i.e., corporations, NGO’s) in the development of international Sesame Street productions. Further, it investigates the deliberate manner in which these productions are created and manipulated, and considers whether and how these manipulations might be used to advance the goals of national identity (both American and that of the receiving nation).

This paper has three parts. Part I will provide an overview of the international Sesame Street productions, their format, and the ways in which they are created and developed for international audiences. Part II will examine the role of the receiving country’s government and Sesame Workshop in the creation, development and production of international Sesame Street series. Within this section, an examination will be made of the negotiations that took place during the creation of the Latin American program, Plaza Sésamo, and Sesame Park (Canada’s version), as these were two of the first Children’s Television Workshop international projects. A brief overview of more recent international incarnations of the series, including the production in China, Russia and Egypt, will discuss reactions both public and governmental to the acquisition and broadcast of these programs. Part III looks specifically at the function of the U.S.

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3 Sesame Workshop was formerly called The Children’s Television Workshop. Sesame Workshop, like the CTW before it, is a not-for-profit corporation. Both names will be used throughout this paper based upon the time period and the corporate entity involved in the transaction.
government in international *Sesame Street* productions, the responsibility government institutions impose on the program and the issues of power that accompany those roles.

**Part I: The Longest Street in the World**

*Sesame Street* needs very little introduction. A mainstay of children’s television in the U.S. since 1969, the program has entertained and helped educate two generations of Americans. But the program’s reach is not limited to the contiguous States. Rather, *Sesame Street* has had its sights on international airwaves almost since its inception (Gettas, 1990; Mayo, Oliveira, Rogers, Guimaraes, & Morett, 1984). For more than 35 years the researchers and producers at the Children’s Television Workshop have been taking their Muppets to distant lands intending to educate the children of the world.

With *Sesame Street*’s power of influence so well known, and the fact that any messages it carries are directed at children, the possibility this program might broadcast within a nation’s boundaries is not something governments are likely to ignore. Indeed, *Sesame Street*’s moves outside of the U.S. have been received with some excitement (the idea that television can educate children being such a positive) but also with some trepidation (is this yet another example of Americanization?). In the end, much negotiation ensues between producers, corporate underwriters, and governments in each new territory before an episode of *Sesame Street* is put on-the-air.

International *Sesame Street* productions come in a variety of formats. For some countries the process is simply one of acquisition. In an acquisition, broadcasters of receiving nations buy the U.S. series in its entirety, often dubbing it to the local language. For others, the “Open Sesame” format is chosen. “Open Sesame” programs consist of purchased American *Sesame Street* elements - usually excluding the street segments
which are very American in appearance and subject matter. The third international format, and the most interesting in terms of the Market for Loyalties model, is the co-production. Table 1 provides a list of international co-productions which have aired (or are still broadcasting).

Table 1 International *Sesame Street* co-productions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5, rue Sésame</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rruga Seam/Ulica Sezam</td>
<td>Kosovo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alam Simsim</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sisimpur</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabai Sabai Sesame</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talakani Sesame</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sesamstrasse</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sesamstraat</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alli Galli Sim Sim</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tbd</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plaza Sesamo</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rechov Sumsum/Shara’a Simsim</td>
<td>Israel/Palestine/Jordan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesame Street</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulitsa Sezam</td>
<td>Russia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tbd</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tbd</td>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susam Skokagi</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashe Maalo</td>
<td>Macedonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesame Park</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tbd</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
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</table>

Co-productions of *Sesame Street* involve the creation of unique, local Muppet characters, home base settings that are appropriate for the receiving country (e.g., in the U.S. the main set is an inner-city street, in South Africa it is a marketplace), locally produced live-action and animation segments, and a culturally appropriate academic curriculum (Gettas, 1990; Lee, 2006; Lewis, 1992). The co-production process is a lengthy one often involving employees of the Workshop traveling to the receiving country to establish a board of advisors which includes local producers, a local broadcaster (often the public broadcaster) and educational advisors (often from the
According to Sesame Workshop, government representatives are always present, but there is a limit to the degree to which governmental influence is allowed. If, for example, suggestions are made which are against the Workshop’s aims, these suggestions will not be accepted at face value. Instead, negotiations ensue until an agreement can be reached. If undue influence is being felt, the Workshop will pull out of a production rather than succumb to a message with which they do not agree (Lee, 2006).

Although these discussions and negotiations result in *Sesame Street* programs with a variety of names (e.g., *Sisimpur* in India, 5, *rue Sésame* in France, and *Sesame Park* in Canada), characters, and theme songs, the design of the program, its basic format, is stable from nation to nation (Inkpen, 2002; Lee, 2006). The purpose of this format constancy is two-fold. Most importantly perhaps, at least for the show’s parent company Sesame Workshop, is the fact that maintaining the U.S. format enables new programs to capitalize on the very well known and well respected *Sesame Street* brand. This “branding” also provides the parent company with the power to control content. Sesame Workshop owns the characters and licenses them to the foreign productions. The Workshop’s name and reputation travel with the appearance of any Muppet, therefore ensuring the quality for which the original program is recognized is an important consideration.

Contractual arrangements with broadcasters take different forms in different nations. For example, the Portuguese broadcaster has the right to broadcast in Angola and Mozambique, and since Dutch is spoken in Aruba and areas of the Caribbean, The Netherlands has the right to broadcast in these regions as well as their own. For all
international agreements, however, when the broadcast license expires, all rights (i.e.g., name, design, characters) revert back to Sesame Workshop (Inkpen, 2002).

There are four mandatory licensing policies of Sesame Workshop: (1) the program must be broadcast commercial-free (although funding agencies can have identification at the top or tail of the show)\(^4\), (2) the program must meet production standards approved of by the Workshop, (3) the program must reflect the values and traditions of the host country’s culture\(^5\) and, (4) any proposed alteration to the series must be approved and overseen by both educational experts and a committee from the Workshop (Inkpen, 2002). The fact that culture is a referenced directly in the mission statement of Sesame Workshop is happenstance. The effectiveness of the content of any educational program is not limited to the characters and the setting. Much of the influence of a series comes from representing the child viewer and his/her experiences on-screen. Kraidy delineates this very clearly,

“Sesame Street’s role as an educational program does not stop at the instruction of specific information but rather reaches into a much broader range of cultural influence with which its young viewers identify and construct an understanding of their sociocultural environment” (2002, p.13).

Indeed, a culture embodies how a people lives, thinks, and acts, and there is intrinsic value to having your own character, customs, heritage, or situation reflected back to you (Pantaleo, 2000). Research has shown that the influence of media content is most powerful when reinforced by personal experience (Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961;

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\(^4\) With the widespread availability of commercial broadcasters, the desire to keep programs commercial-free is becoming increasingly more financially challenging. Recently, the Mexican production *Plaza Sésamo* has included commercial breaks within the body of the program. Research has determined that child viewers were able to discern between content and ad. It may become necessary to remove the commercial-free stipulation in some markets (Inkpen, 2002).

\(^5\) According to Gettas (1990) the Workshop has made this a priority in order to “ensure that CTW’s values did not slip, unwanted, into another country’s programming.”
Van Evra, 1998). It is likely, therefore, that a Sesame Street programme in which a child sees himself and his social world reflected may increase his learning from the content and play a role in the formation and maintenance of his attitudes and expectations as a resident of his country (Williams, Phillips, Travis & Wotherspoon, 1990). Consequently, the cultural content of international productions of Sesame Street is an issue which has to be dealt with in each receiving nation.

Cultural icons like myths, heroes, dreams and history play a large role in formulating and solidifying the national identity (Reid, 1997; Sanchez, 2000; Warren, 1972). These symbols of the nation, when accepted by the audience, “can serve as an integrating and assimilating influence that subtly reinforces a vision of cohesion, or can reinforce existing cultural divisions in society” (Price, 1994, p. 671). Therefore, providing programming for children which is culturally salient not only improves its educational prowess but can also be a tool for reinforcing the doctrine of the ruling regime. Decisions regarding the design of an educational program like Sesame Street are, needless to say, taken seriously and the content becomes a negotiating ground for buyers and sellers in the Market for Loyalty.

It is interesting to note, in light of this debate over content, that international co-productions are not completely devoid of U.S. produced material. Much of the appeal of the Sesame Street program for other nations is that it comes with this ready-to-air product. I will discuss the allure of this more fully in Part II, however, it must be said that any segments from the American program included in a foreign production have been chosen by the receiving nation - often because they are considered “culturally neutral” (i.e., no American symbols, historic figures, or alphabet). Of course this idea of
cultural neutrality has been duly questioned over the years and, while pertinent, is a debate beyond the scope of this essay (Goldsen & Bibliowicz, 1976).

A cursory cost-benefit analysis of the protracted and expensive process involved in a co-production might lead one to ask, why does a non-profit like Sesame Workshop bother? Pose this question to anyone in the international productions office and they will be direct. First and foremost are the altruistic reasons such as providing education to children the world round (Lee, 2006), and global, social reasons such as “spreading a message of tolerance and diversity in France, promoting unity in India between rural and urban areas, or easing ethnic tensions in Kosovo” (Carvajal, 2005). Beyond these aspirations are the financial gains. Revenue at Sesame Workshop totals more than $96 million\(^6\), (Carvajal, 2005) much of which comes from international licensing, and the marketing opportunity afforded by the creation of new, culturally specific Muppet characters (Inkpen, 2002). This international income is the life-blood of the parent program in the U.S. Without it, the extremely expensive flagship series could not be produced (Lee, 2006). From the point of view of the Workshop, the productions are mutually, or even multiply, beneficial. Children in countries outside the U.S. have access to the enormously effective educational and prosocial content, and the Workshop has revenue to continue to produce its original program. Nevertheless, the benefits and costs to the receiving nation demands closer investigation.

Part II: Education or Americanization of the World’s Children?

The ubiquity of state-supported or state-run broadcast systems throughout the world has no doubt contributed to the spread of Sesame Street around the globe (Gettas,

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\(^6\) An Asiamedia news report suggested this total was 1.2 billion dollars US when all marketing efforts are included
Public broadcasting, generally looked upon as both an instrument of national policy and a tool for maintaining cultural identity and traditional values (Price, 1995), can justify its existence through the sponsorship and broadcasting of programming for children. For commercial broadcasters children’s programming is simply not lucrative. The programs themselves are expensive and the financial returns simply do not make it worth their while. Therefore, without state-supported production, programming for children would likely not be made. Needless to say, charged with the responsibility of both protecting and perpetuating national identities and developing the minds of child viewers, these government run public broadcasters are often working on miniscule budgets. For these broadcasters, *Sesame Street* can be at once appealing and threatening.

First, the series is renowned for being a quality program with an enormous audience. Every broadcaster justifies its existence by “the numbers” – the ratings which indicate the number of viewers per episode. A program with such an audience draw is therefore appealing. Second, taking on *Sesame Street* in any format means a broadcaster has access to a bulk of previously produced airtime-filling content at a manageable price. With the *Sesame Street* model, a broadcaster can produce high-quality programming tailored to their budgetary limitations while at the same time support the cultural and educational needs of their child viewers (Gettas, 1990; Lee, 2006). Additionally, when *Sesame Street* comes to town it brings with it experts who train local producers, puppeteers, animators and filmmakers - benefits to the production industry which far outlast the run of most series (Lee, 2006). Nevertheless, the importation of a cultural product from the world’s most influential nation, especially a product aimed at the next
generation of citizens, raises sensitive issues of power and flow. Are international versions of the children’s program being produced with this kind of cultural persuasion in mind? Certainly this has been a question asked in many receiving nations.

*International Co-Productions: The Muppet March*

*Sesame Street’s first move* outside of the English speaking world was into the Latin American countries. The idea was to create a single Spanish-language program (130 half-hour episodes) that would reflect the many different subcultures of the Latin American audience, thereby enabling the broadcast of one program across all of Central and South America, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico - a formidable task, and one which meant several cultures had to be recognized and governments had to be appeased.

The first step towards this Latin American amalgamation was the decision to use “neutral” Spanish. This, it was suggested, would make the show acultural. Years later, a similar tactic was taken in the *Iftah Y Simsim* production, a *Sesame Street* version intended to broadcast throughout the Arab world (a region with at least 17 distinct Arabic dialects). The idea was to broadcast the series in Modern Standard Arabic, the formal and classically used language of the Holy Koran - a decision which has been likened to having Big Bird speak in Shakespearean English. Goldsen and Bibliowicz (1976) suggest these aims of neutrality, be it “neutral” language or “neutral” situations, are impossible to achieve. The program, they argue, is inherently cultural, offering “an important part of the cultural scaffolding” (p. 124) on which children understand their place in their social world.
Funding for the first season of Plaza Sésamo came predominantly through the Xerox Corporation and the Workshop. As Mayo and his colleagues (1984) suggest, this corporate funding was necessary for the project to get off the ground, however, “it also put an indelible North American stamp on the co-production” (1984). American corporations continue to invest in international co-productions of Sesame Street. General Electric, Nestlé, Merrill Lynch and Turner Broadcasting are among the top sponsors.

The Canadian co-production, which commenced during the same period as the Mexican production, similarly had language and cultural identity issues with which to attend. With some 90% of the Canadian population living within 100 kilometres of the United States border, fear that American cultural products like Sesame Street would engulf the Canadian identity and wipe out the cultural industry has always been forefront in the minds of Canadian regulators (Bird, 1988; Raboy, 1990). To combat this threat, the Canadian government regulates heavily the content of all television programs broadcast between its borders. Since Canadian Sesame Street (eventually renamed Sesame Park) was to be broadcast on the national public broadcaster (The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, CBC) Canada’s two official languages (English and French) had to be included. Furthermore, the majority of the on-air content was mandated to be produced in-country.

Even so, concerns were raised because viewers were not able to distinguish the CBC version of the program from the PBS version that was so readily seeping up from the south. To combat this, the decision was made that segments should be more Canadian. This meant the creation of Canadian Muppets sporting the maple leaf, and the
filming of live-action segments which declared their location to the audience at large (Lewis, 1992).

Similar issues of language and location were evident during the negotiations for the Chinese production. Sesame Workshop set their sites on China in the mid-1990s. They first contacted four Chinese universities looking for interested education researchers to become involved in brainstorming meetings that would result in possible partnerships. The diversity of dialects and regional character were absolutely at issue no matter who took on the co-producing task. Much debate ensued and, for a period, it appeared that the Workshop would have to walk away from the production (Lee, 2006). In the end, Shanghai Television and General Electric were ultimately chosen as the broadcaster and primary sponsor and the process of creating Zhima Jie began. The program included a cast of Muppets representative of the individual provinces and a clear aim at teaching not only the various dialects but also English. The first show aired in Beijing and 38 other markets in 1998 reaching an estimated 100 million people (Inkpen, 2002) and was an instant success not only for children but also for adults.

Set in a courtyard rather than a city street, Ulitsa Sezam, is the Russian version of the program. In the case of this co-production, education was only one of the programs three main objectives. It also had a clear directive toward democratization and business principles (Inkpen, 2002) and was designed to suffuse each episode with attempts to breakdown Russian stereotypes. In the Sesame world of Russia, not only were dark-skinned people from the Caucasus Republics friendly and helpful, but little girls played sports, and fathers did the dishes (Cooperman, 1996). Sponsored both by USAID, the Soros Foundation and the Nestlé Corporation, the program drew a lot of censure from
Russian nationalists. Concerns over cultural imperialism were rampant. Similarly, when Egypt first began its production Alam simsim outraged government officials and media spokespeople alike criticized the program as exporting American culture and values.

Issues of social persuasion were similarly evident in the Jordan / Israel / Palestine production. In fact, they were a mandate. Outlined clearly in a Workshop press release of 2003, “the project aims to help lay the foundation for future stability, prosperity, and hope for peace in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine” (Workshop, 2003). Lofty goals indeed. According to a report from the Jerusalem Post, however, there is something of an imbalance when it comes to characters portrayed on air. Having a child with a kippa, for example, was expected to be “provocative to Palestinians at this time” and, with the aim to avoid upsetting parents, few characters on the Palestinian version have such. However, an Arabic garment shown on the Israeli program is deemed not nearly as inflammatory (Gelfond, 2004). As Gelfond (2004) suggests, it is unclear how and if this asymmetry is being consumed by child viewers.

How important or how valid are these concerns about cultural assimilation or cultural influence? Are these receiving countries right to wonder what purpose lies behind this American institution (besides its clear financial prosperity)? And how might receiving governments be using this program for their own loyalty enterprises?

Part III: Brought to you by the letters U, S, and A

One of the single biggest sponsors of most of the Workshop’s international programs is the U.S. Government. In fact, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has contributed $7 million over first three years for a Sesame Street series in Bangladesh – a program that has an estimated reach of 4 million children
in the first 2 years alone. In this case, the money the agency provided is also used for outreach elements (e.g., story books and other supplemental material) for distribution among pre-school aged children, and for a small fleet of flatbed cycle rickshaws that carries a TV, DVD player, and generator, taking the program to children in villages not serviced by electricity (USAID, 2006c).

Similarly, USAID sponsors ($8.5 million) the Egyptian Sesame Street production. This series is regularly watched by more than 99% of all children under 8 years in urban areas, 86% of children in rural areas (i.e., more than 5 million children across Egypt) and 54% of all mothers. According to a USAID report, “90% of Egyptian children are watching, learning to read, and changing their attitudes”(USAID, 2006a). It is, of course, this attitude changing that has some officials on the defensive.

USAID is also “exploring opportunities to develop [Sesame Street] in Pakistan, Croatia, Bosnia, (and) Serbia” (USAID, 2006a). Table 2 shows the list of international co-production that have been, or that continue to be, sponsored by USAID. The table also indicates those productions which broadcast on the national public broadcaster. It is evident, when examining this list, that the target nations for Sesame Street sponsorship are strategic with regard U.S. foreign policy. Thus, whilst the Children’s Television Workshop’s international mandate may clearly indicate a recognition of and adherence to content that reflects the morals and traditions of the receiving nation (Dilley, 2003; Gettas, 1990), the fact that the U.S. State Department is involved in the ultimate use of these programs can cause eyebrows to raise. Indeed, there are indications that the Workshop and the U.S. Government may have very different ultimate goals in mind for the series.
Table 2 International *Sesame Street* co-productions sponsored by USAID and broadcast on national public broadcasters

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<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>USAID</th>
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</tr>
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<td>5, rue Sééma</td>
<td>France</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rruga Seam/Ulica Seéma</td>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Alam Simsim</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
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Charlotte Beers, U.S. Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy in 2001, on a mission to promote her “Shared Values Campaign” made clear the U.S. State Department’s opinion regarding the purposes of the International *Sesame Street* programs when she announced that there is “an army willing to be signed up to engage the world on behalf of the United States” (as reported in Dilley, 2003). The army to which she was referring was the Muppets. As a rationalization for the use of *Sesame Street* as a messenger of the U.S. doctrine she said of potential viewers,

“They do not even know the basics about us. They are taught to distrust our every motive. Such distortions married to a lack of knowledge, is a deadly cocktail. Engaging, teaching common values are preventative medicine.”

(Dilley, 2003, p.1)
“The children are glued to the set” she said, referring to the Egyptian production, “They are learning English, they are learning about American values.” In this same newspaper report, Dilley (2003) quotes another, this time nameless, U.S. government official who declared the international programs are deliberately “aiming to promote greater understanding of American morality and culture” (p.1). Not quite the same lessons outlined in the Workshop mission statement.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on her quest to halt the rising anti-U.S. feelings in the world’s Muslim nations, recently shook hands with Sesame Street’s Elmo as a means of promoting the message that Western culture can co-exist peacefully with moderate Islam. To some, most notably Fauzan al Anshari of the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, Elmo’s waving of the U.S. flag was simply too much. He argued “the U.S. donations for education in Indonesia were obviously an attempt at propaganda, and an attempt to bend the curriculum to suit U.S. ideas” (quoted in Powell, 2006). One might find it difficult to disagree with him.

Sesame Workshop finds itself in a not so subtle bind. It is the U.S. government, after all, USAID in particular, that supports much of the overseas production and yet when approached to include the Muppets for clearly political situations the Workshop balks. It is difficult to insist your motives are pure (purely educational, purely prosocial) when your headliners are waving a flag and standing next to an American political powerhouse. Secretary Rice and Ms. Beers are not the only American politicians to promote the “American message” with a Muppet by their side. First Lady Laura Bush traveled to the Middle East in 2005 to promote “U.S. values and women’s empowerment” and included in her journey a guest appearance on Alam Simsim the Israeli / Palestinian /
Jordanian production (Chaffin, Daniel & Dinmore, 2005). This year she accompanied her husband, President George W. Bush, to India where he forged “several new agreements between India and the United States – including a much-heralded nuclear deal” (USAID, 2006b) and she dropped by the set of Galli Galli Sim Sim, India’s version of Sesame Street.

Government involvement does not stop at the U.S. State Department, however. Interestingly, the Israeli / Palestinian / Jordanian production was funded by 8 American underwriters including the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Ford Foundation. It also receives funding from the European Union, the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, and the Canadian Foreign Ministry (Gelfond, 2004). Yet, when it comes to co-productions that cross national boundaries (particularly those whose boundaries are the cause of such strife) on which side do the sponsors land? The European Union has been making distinct efforts to support the Palestinian territories, providing money mainly to bolster the building of infrastructure and democratic institutions. Does this mean the other governmental sponsors are supporting Israel in order to keep the program on an even keel? It is difficult to discern.

Research which has found that the Kosovo and Jordan / Palestine / Israel programs support the teaching of tolerance to children has prompted The American Ireland Fund to earmark $1 million for a new Northern Ireland version of Sesame Street (O'Driscoll, 2006). This co-production is to begin its development stage very soon.

Knowing all of this, one finds it difficult to argue the main function of the program is simply to educate children. Sesame Street is clearly seen as a source of power
and means of manipulating the flow of information in a variety of strategic territories around the globe.

Discussion

The Market for Loyalties is about the competition for power – the power that comes with controlling the attention of the masses. Within this market, competition is manipulated by means of regulating the information and imagery that can enter the nation, establishing rules for sharing in or being excluded from the communication process. Simply put, when one has control over these processes of information sharing one has control over the ideas “bought” by the citizens (Price, 1994). *Sesame Street* is a tool in the international Marketplace for Loyalties. An ideological powerhouse for more than four decades, the content it provides is understandably under scrutiny. While the parent production company may see its product as merely a tool for educating and enlightening children, the fact that the program has one foot in the United States means these same lessons are the stuff of controversy. Foreign governments may question the motives behind the programs didacticism. As Price suggests,

“A ruling party may see the images…as a threat both to its culture and, more centrally, to its continued hold on power. In some settings, foreign programs…are characterized as subversive; their storylines advocate a view of the individual that is wholly at odds with the perspective of the ruling regime. The regime may fear that the successful penetration of the worldview contained in Western (products) will yield instability and calls for internal political change” (Price, 1994, p. 675-6)

*Sesame Street* may be considered just such a product, and one particularly threatening because it targets the newest of citizens.

Television’s ability to influence viewers has been studied since its inception. Today, there is little doubt that messages broadcast over this medium are powerful
indeed. The content of children’s television and *Sesame Street* in particular has its own unique influence that comes with its very particular audience (Ball & Bogatz, 1971; Fisch, Truglio & Cole, 1999). Programs such as *Sesame Street* have been found to influence children’s behaviour (pro- and anti-social), and to inform them about the world. Ultimately, television has the power to educate children in a plethora of different ways (Fisch, Truglio & Cole, 1999). *Sesame Street* as an influential entity is particularly unique because it does not limit its coverage to television airwaves. In fact, tens of thousands of Sesame Workshop products are available globally including CD-ROMs, video games, DVDs, toys, books and even cookies. There are also *Sesame Street* theme parks in the U.S., in Mexico, Brazil, and Japan (Inkpen, 2002; Lee, 2006).

Children, these new and open-minded citizens, may be the most valuable of all group loyalties, particularly where a nation’s myths, beliefs, and narratives are concerned. They are, after all, the future politicians, policy-makers, law-breakers, and consumers. Their position in the Market for Loyalties is therefore a strategic one. Local governments are taking a role in developing the content of incoming *Sesame Street* productions. This is indicative of Price’s second element of the Market for Loyalty, that of “the state as censor” versus “the state as generator” of images (Price, 1994). Furthermore, the involvement of the U.S. government in the design and exploitation of *Sesame Street* content suggests its own belief that the program can be an influential piece of… dare we say, American propaganda?

The United States government is clearly using the power of *Sesame Street* to improve its image internationally. By entering developing nations and supporting the social and academic development of children in these countries, goodwill toward the
American people can indeed be fostered through brightly coloured puppets and cuddly plush toys. Sesame Workshop is using the series to maintain and grow a non-profit organization that has the altruistic intentions of educating, inspiring and supporting the social development of the world’s children. The nations receiving the co-production opportunities are developing their television industry, supporting their national broadcasters, aiding the academic development of their children and simultaneously using the medium to support and extend national and cultural identities. Is any of this wrong? As long as children are potentially learning global values like tolerance and compassion, and academic skills such as literacy, who is to say which motives are the most sincere and which are untoward? What would happen if the next generation of Israelis and Palestinians, or Catholics and Anglicans in Ireland, did not see their differences and wondered instead, “what’s the problem here?” Perhaps the world could be changed by messages spread from three-year-old to three-year-old.
References


