

**What *Sesame Street* Can Teach Us About HBO**  
**Shayne Pepper**  
**Department of Communication, Media, and Theatre**

In late 2015, news headlines announced HBO's acquisition of first-run rights to air new episodes of *Sesame Street* nine months before their PBS debut. Some critics joked that it would birth an edgier version of *Sesame Street* for HBO, while others lamented the apparent stratification of children's programming that such a move could create between kids whose families could afford cable and those whose could not. While most articles noted that HBO's previous work with Muppets in Jim Henson's *Fraggle Rock* (1983 – 1987), many conveyed a tone of surprise about this brave new world of *Sesame Street* on subscription cable.

HBO's partnership with *Sesame Street* raises important questions about the role of public service programming in a commercial television system. These same questions dominated industry discourse of the early 1980s. Between 1978 – 1988, HBO's original programming similarly turned to a style that was typically associated with public television. This included PBS mainstays such as documentaries, family programming, concerts, and filmed theatre. HBO pursued such cultural programming in order to develop a brand identity, to respond to industry discourse about the "public service" role of cable, and to cheaply fill their own programming schedule. A greater knowledge of this early history helps to contextualize contemporary debates and practices while providing a more detailed narrative of HBO's early 1980s history than what is currently available.

This presentation draws upon a largely untapped archive of the trade journal *CableVision* in order to shine a light on HBO's decisions within the context of broader trends in the cable industry. These decisions in the early 1980s were the start of a strategy that would come to define a large amount of HBO's signature style of original programming to the present day. In the pages of *CableVision*, three points become clear. First, HBO turned to original programming to fill its growing schedule as a cheaper and easier alternative to buying Hollywood films. Second, HBO began to develop what would become its signature branding strategy within a crowded, and often chaotic, marketplace of cable channels all experimenting with programming. Third, HBO's early original programming in this period was styled partly in response to broader discourse surrounding the cable industry's role in public service and cultural programming that manifested itself in an industry-wide focus on documentaries, family programming, concerts, and even filmed theatre.