

Cultural Programming and the Early History of HBO's Signature Style, 1978–1988

ABSTRACT

Between 1978 and 1988, HBO began creating original programming that was most often associated with public television. This included PBS mainstays such as documentaries, family programming, concerts, and filmed theater. HBO pursued such cultural programming 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. This article draws upon a largely untapped resource of the industry trade journal *CableVision* to trace HBO's programming decisions within the context of broader trends in the cable industry.

In late 2015, news headlines announced HBO's acquisition of first-run rights to air new episodes of *Sesame Street* (PBS, 1969–) nine months before their PBS debut.¹ Critics buzzed about this decision. Some joked that it would birth an edgier version of *Sesame Street*, while others lamented the apparent stratification of children's programming between families who could afford cable and those who could not.² While most articles noted 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. Summing up the mood, Emily Steel of the *New York Times* wrote, "It is

1 See, for example, Josef Adalian, "Mitt Romney Won: In a Blow to the 47 Percent, *Sesame Street* Moves to HBO," *Vulture*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.vulture.com/2015/08/sesame-street-hbo-mitt-romney-wins.html>.

2 Sarah Begley, "How the Internet Had Fun with *Sesame Street* Moving to HBO," *Time*, August 13, 2015, <https://time.com/3996234/sesame-street-hbo-jokes/>.

Shayne Pepper, "Cultural Programming and the Early History of HBO's Signature Style, 1978–1988," *JCMS* 61, no. 5 (2021–2022): 86–112.

an unexpected union: the nonprofit behind a TV show created to teach children in underserved communities matched with the premium cable network that targets affluent adults with innovative programming.”³

Another common assessment framed HBO’s move as a response to competition from streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, which were actively establishing programming lineups and catalogs to retain and grow subscribers.⁴ Indeed, HBO is in a transformative industrial environment driven by changes in viewing habits due to streaming video, but it is important to place this contemporary moment within a broader historical context. Thirty-five years before the 2015 *Sesame Street* announcement, HBO executives faced a similar industrial shift with the cable revolution. Then, as now, they could not simply purchase rights to more feature films and expect to stay competitive. HBO focused instead on expanding original programming to diversify its lineup. While original dramatic and comedic series are central to HBO’s programming schedule and brand identity today, they can be expensive and uncertain in their success. In both the earlier cable revolution and the current streaming revolution, HBO has turned to cheaper cultural and educational programming far more likely to be found on public television.

Although this partnership surprised many journalists and media critics, this was not the first time that HBO and PBS programming practices crossed paths. In response to the 2015 *Sesame Street* announcement, Jonathan Gray wrote in *Antenna*, “PBS has long aspired to be HBO (even before there was an HBO!), so in some senses the custody agreement over *Sesame Street* shouldn’t seem so odd.”⁵ While Gray’s statement is certainly true, this article will consider its inverse, demonstrating that a particular segment of HBO’s original programming has often looked like a for-profit version of PBS. This is nowhere clearer than in the earliest periods of HBO’s history. To support this claim and to better explain HBO’s current transitional moment in the age of streaming video, this article provides a fine-grained history of HBO production practices in the late 1970s and 1980s, an earlier period of change in the wake of the cable revolution. Examination of a largely untapped resource, the industry trade journal *CableVision*, reveals a history of HBO and PBS competing for programming (and sometimes even sharing it). While most histories of HBO make use of sources such as *Variety* and the *New York Times*, *CableVision* offers an additional view into HBO’s industrial practices within the context of broader trends in the cable industry.⁶

3 Emily Steel, “‘Sesame Street’ to Air First on HBO for Next 5 Seasons,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/business/media/sesame-street-heading-to-hbo-in-fall.html>.

4 Brian Steinberg, “Why ‘Sesame Street’ Had to Turn a Corner,” *Variety*, August 13, 2015, <https://variety.com/2015/tv/news/sesame-street-hbo-sesame-workshop-1201569728/>; and Victor Luckerson, “This Is Why HBO Really Wants *Sesame Street*,” *Time*, August 13, 2015, <https://time.com/3996575/hbo-sesame-street/>.

5 Jonathan Gray, “Sesame Street’s New Landlord,” *Antenna* (blog), August 15, 2015, <https://blog.commart.wisc.edu/2015/08/15/sesame-streets-new-landlord/>.

6 As access to this trade journal remains limited to physical copies, this article is the first to fully mine *CableVision* for the industrial discourse that paints a detailed picture of HBO’s early history. Some of the most complete print collections of *CableVision* can be found at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Northwestern

In the pages of *CableVision*, three points become clear. First, HBO turned to original programming to fill its growing schedule as a cheaper alternative to buying Hollywood films. Second, HBO began to develop what would become its signature programming strategy within a crowded and often chaotic marketplace of cable channels all experimenting with programming. Third, HBO's 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 filmed theater. As today, when HBO's partnership with *Sesame Street* and the Sesame Workshop (formerly the Children's Television Workshop [CTW]) raises important questions about the role of public service programming in a commercial and pay television system, these same questions dominated industry discourse of the early 1980s.⁷ 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.

Industry trade journals, advertisements, newspaper articles, and largely forgotten programming are required if we are to understand HBO not as a product of a few business-savvy executives or a history of its own making but as a cable network that was born from a particular social, political, and economic context. HBO's attempts at influencing regulation and directing public discourse via particular public relations strategies and advertising campaigns helped to shape this very context. While it is true that *CableVision* is a mixture of industry journalism and public relations, it also contains a wealth of information for scholars. Industry journalists paid close attention to corporate practices and programming decisions, and they provide a record of cable's history during the expansion frenzy of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of course, that record is often filtered through strategic communication on the part of industry professionals, and these accounts (however detailed) must be read with an appropriately critical eye. As television industry scholars such as Todd Gitlin, John Caldwell, Jennifer Holt, and Alisa Perren demonstrate in their own work, we must account for the individual actors and their decisions despite their location within a larger corporate and industrial structure.⁸ My aim is to do the same with HBO through an analysis of its programming strategies and tactics during this early period of its history.

The 2015 collaboration with the Sesame Workshop belongs to a rich history of HBO collaborating with CTW and PBS. In 2005, PBS aired several HBO films—*Dirty War* (Daniel Percival, 2004), *Sometimes in April* (Raoul Peck, 2005), and *Yesterday* (Darrell Roodt, 2004)—along with a roundtable

University, and University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. With the help of two graduate assistants, I reviewed every available issue from 1975 to 1993 and digitized each article, news item, or advertisement related to HBO or cultural programming.

7 I will refer to the Sesame Workshop mostly by its pre-2005 name, Children's Television Workshop (CTW), as most of the archival material refers to it as such.

8 See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1994); John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and the many contributors in Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren's indispensable collection *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

discussion involving members of the Council on Foreign Relations.⁹ In 1992, HBO aired a made-for-PBS documentary about AIDS activism, *Voices from the Front* (Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and David Meieran, 1991), after PBS declined to air it.¹⁰ In 1988, CTW and HBO collaborated on the series *Encyclopedia* (1988–1989), created by CTW and aired exclusively on HBO.¹¹ Two of the key figures in HBO programming, Frank Biondi and Sheila Nevins, even worked at CTW before moving to HBO. After outlining the current state of HBO scholarship, I explore this history of collaboration and competition more deeply.

REEXAMINING EXISTING STUDIES OF HBO'S HISTORY

Considering the popularity of HBO's programming and its significant role in the entertainment industry, one might assume its history has been thoroughly documented in the way that NBC, Nickelodeon, PBS, and other channels have been.¹² Despite a number of first-rate books and articles about HBO's programming from the mid-1990s forward, its earlier periods have seen little sustained examination.¹³ Recent years have seen studies of HBO reach a fever pitch, but much of this work focuses on newer critically acclaimed series such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2008), *Deadwood* (2004–2006), or *Girls* (2012–2017).¹⁴

Two edited collections, *The Essential HBO Reader* and *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, published just months apart in 2008, make great strides to shift studies of HBO from textual analyses of individual programs to a wider examination of the cable channel itself.¹⁵ The essays in

- 9 PBS Publicity, "HBO and PBS Announce Unprecedented Partnership to Air Three Original HBO Productions on Nuclear Terrorism, Genocide, and AIDS," press release, January 13, 2005, https://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/news/20050113_pbs-hbo.html.
- 10 Shayne Pepper, "Public Service Entertainment: HBO's Interventions in Politics and Culture," in *Media Interventions*, ed. Kevin Howley (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 127–142.
- 11 "HBO and Children's Television Workshop," *CableVision*, April 11, 1988, 26.
- 12 See, for example, Michele Hilmes, ed., *NBC: America's Network* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Heather Hendershot, ed., *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and James Day, *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
- 13 For example, a broad historical overview of HBO is used to preface an excellent discussion of *The Sopranos* in Deborah L. Jaramillo, "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26 (January 2002): 59–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859902026001005>.
- 14 See, for example, David Lavery, ed., *Reading "The Sopranos": Hit TV from HBO* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Shirin S. Deylami and Jonathan Havercroft, eds., *The Politics of HBO's "The Wire": Everything Is Connected* (London: Routledge, 2015); Paul Stasi and Jennifer Greiman, eds., *The Last Western: "Deadwood" and the End of American Empire* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Elwood Watson, Jennifer Mitchell, and Marc Edward Shaw, eds., *HBO's "Girls" and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).
- 15 See Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, eds., *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008); and Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, eds., *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

these collections examine individual programs and genres from a broader perspective, taking into account cultural and industrial contexts as well as the discourse of quality and auteurism that often surrounds HBO. Both collections provide valuable additions to existing scholarship, but given HBO's nearly fifty-year history, they serve as vital *first* steps toward a more complete understanding of the cable network that must be built through expanded research and analysis.

For decades, the only book-length study that attempted to chronicle HBO through an industry lens was George Mair's *Inside HBO: The Billion Dollar War between HBO, Hollywood, and the Home Video Revolution*, published in 1988. Mair, a journalist and former chief public relations counsel for HBO, presents a popular history written for a business-oriented audience. He provides useful information about the corporate decisions of HBO's early years, but his narrative relies heavily on emphasizing entrepreneurial notions and the value of shrewd business tactics.¹⁶ In 2015, Bill Mesce Jr., another industry insider, released *Inside the Rise of HBO: A Personal History of the Company That Transformed Television*.¹⁷ Mesce worked at HBO for twenty-seven years and, like Mair, provides behind-the-scenes stories of HBO's corporate decision-making as it relates to marketing and programming. To date, these two remain the only book-length surveys of HBO from its inception. The absence of a comprehensive scholarly history of HBO's early years (and the fact that internal HBO archives remain inaccessible to scholars) points to the remaining need for this history to be written.

There are, of course, scholars such as Patrick Parsons, Megan Mullen, and Amanda Lotz, who are doing the critical work of mapping the current television and streaming media landscape, and they have written excellent comprehensive histories of the wider cable industry.¹⁸ Their projects make extensive use of cable industry trade journals, magazines, interviews, oral histories, and legal documents (with Parsons and Mullen in particular drawing heavily upon the tremendous resource of *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine).¹⁹ Building on these works, this article uses an expanded set of archival sources to examine HBO's first major efforts in the realm of original programming. Focusing on the period from 1978 to 1988, I argue that conversations about public service and cultural programming appearing on HBO are not new

16 George Mair, *Inside HBO: The Billion Dollar War between HBO, Hollywood, and the Home Video Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1988).

17 Bill Mesce Jr., *Inside the Rise of HBO: A Personal History of the Company That Transformed Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015).

18 See Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Megan Mullen, *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Patrick R. Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014); and Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

19 Elsewhere Megan Mullen examines the pre-history of pay cable by using HBO's entry as an endpoint rather than a starting point. See Megan Mullen, "The Pre-history of Pay Cable Television: An Overview and Analysis," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19, no. 1 (1999): 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014396899100352>.

and in fact from the start influenced a strategy that would come to define a significant portion of HBO's signature style.

I am not alone in seeking to expand the scholarly narrative of HBO through continued historical research and critical industry analysis. Gareth James explores the connections between HBO and its parent company, Time Inc.²⁰ His work provides a much-needed historicization of this period, demonstrating that many of HBO's experiments with programming during the 1970s cannot be separated from their institutional roots within Time Inc.'s publishing history. James convincingly argues that the logics at work within the publishing arm of Time Inc. helped to shape the aesthetic and business choices made by HBO during this period. My article, however, demonstrates a simultaneous yet equally strong influence at work in HBO's programming of the time: one centered on public service television.

HBO (AND CABLE) TURNS TOWARD ORIGINAL PROGRAMMING

The pages of *CableVision* present the 1970s and 1980s as a time of rapid growth and increasing competition that led HBO to begin defining its brand more clearly. Unsurprisingly, HBO's programming during this period was quite diverse as they had yet to refine their approach to filling the HBO schedule beyond amassing as much programming as possible as cheaply as possible. In its earliest years, this often meant airing performances by comedians, musicians, and magicians (through the *On Location* [1976–1978] series); local-market sports, including bowling, soccer, and the NBA's Golden State Warriors games; and even nationally broadcast rodeos and roller derbies.²¹

By 1976, HBO advertising boasted deals to air thirteen filmed plays from the American Film Theatre, the American premiere of *The Pallisers* (BBC Two, 1974), and several feature films for children.²² HBO even showed two back-to-back unaired episodes of the series *Beacon Hill* (CBS, 1975), which had been canceled the previous year. On this night, HBO encouraged viewers to call a toll-free telephone number to provide reactions, presumably to help HBO decide whether to invest in renewing the series.²³ Clearly, HBO's need for content during this period resulted in considerable experimentation. This was also, of course, several decades before streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon would use a similar strategy of picking up canceled network shows to build upon existing audiences.

One reason for such experimentation was HBO's inability to simply fill its schedule with more Hollywood movies to attract and retain subscribers. These movies were often difficult to obtain due to Federal Communications Com-

20 Gareth Andrew James, *HBO: Brand Management and Subscriber Aggregation: 1972–2007* (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2011).

21 Mair, *Inside HBO*, 28–29. Also see *CableVision*, November 24, 1975, 37, and *CableVision*, May 10, 1976, 34.

22 "HBO Is More than Just a Box of Popcorn," HBO Advertisement, *CableVision*, March 29, 1976. Also see Paul Maxwell, "Will Culture Sell Subscribers?," *CableVision*, March 29, 1976, 141–145.

23 *CableVision*, June 7, 1976, 51. Later in 1982, there were also talks that HBO would pick up ABC's *Taxi* (ABC, 1978–1982; NBC, 1982–1983) when it was canceled in 1982, but it did not come to fruition, and the show moved to NBC (see *CableVision*, May 31, 1982, 10).

mission (FCC) rules regarding films telecast on cable. Eventually, HBO sued the FCC for the right to telecast films that were, at the time, available only to broadcast television. The US Court of Appeals ruled in HBO's favor on March 25, 1977, in a ruling that became known as the HBO Decision.²⁴ While this expanded the pool of desirable Hollywood movies available for cable licensing, HBO continued pursuing original programming after the ruling to fill gaps still present in its schedule. HBO had first dabbled in original programming in March of 1973, with the broadcast of the Pennsylvania Polka Festival at the Allentown Fairgrounds, and began airing original programming with some regularity by 1975. However, a significant push for such content began in earnest after HBO posted its first quarterly profit in late 1977.²⁵ In early 1978, original programming "specials" (what HBO would soon call "magazine programming") became a key component of their scheduling strategy.²⁶

HBO faced increasing competition from commercial broadcasters and other subscription-based pay channels in the late 1970s. In order to set itself apart, HBO's strategy was to create the kind of original programming that was not normally the province of one of its cable competitors nor network television. Rather, the signature content designed to set HBO apart was the type of programming most often associated at that time with public television and PBS in particular: socially committed documentaries and other culturally engaged programming.

Of course, HBO was not acting in isolation. Between 1978 and 1988, Showtime, Bravo, Arts & Entertainment (A&E), and several other cable channels all experimented with original programming, a significant portion of which was documentary programming, theater performances, concerts, and family programming.²⁷ As Mullen writes, "cable entrepreneurs believed that viewers who were frustrated with the formulaic narratives of commercial broadcast television would flock to any cable network providing an intelligent alternative."²⁸ Interest in this type of cultural programming on cable would ebb and flow in response to budgetary changes as well as audience and industry response, and this was particularly true with HBO. While Bravo and A&E offered high-culture programming in order to capture PBS viewers *already accessing* similar content for free, HBO tried to reach a broader demographic that *included* those PBS viewers—liberal middle- to upper-class educated viewers who could afford subscription television. Although focusing exclusively on cultural programming did not prove to be a high-profit approach for Bravo and A&E, including this programming as one segment of their schedule worked well for HBO.²⁹

24 For more on the HBO Decision, see Parsons, *Blue Skies*; Mair, *Inside HBO*; and Mullen, *Rise of Cable Programming*, pp. 353–356. Also see industry reaction in "A Special PayVision Report," *CableVision*, April 11, 1977, 21–24.

25 "HBO . . . Broke into the Black for the First Time," *CableVision*, October 24, 1977, 5.

26 "HBO Outlines '81 Specials Strategy," *CableVision*, January 26, 1981, 14.

27 For an overview of the history of A&E, see David Craig and Derek Johnson, "A&E: From Art to Vice in the Managed Channel Portfolio," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 157–166.

28 Mullen, *Rise of Cable Programming*, 156–157.

29 David Waterman, "The Failure of Cultural Programming on Cable TV: An Economic Interpretation," *Journal of Communication* 36, no. 3 (September 1986): 92–107, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1986.tb01440.x>.

HBO's famous tagline—"It's Not TV. It's HBO."—portrays the cable channel as some nebulous entity that cannot be defined by the standards of conventional television. Yet Avi Santo argues that HBO should, instead, be considered *para-television*, "which purposely relies on mimicking and tweaking existing and recognizable TV forms." HBO experiments with the forms of network television (i.e., half-hour situation comedies and hour-long dramas) in order to offer recognizable programs that "distinguish its product from standard network fare while simultaneously looking to broadcast and cable networks as sites for future syndication and production deals."³⁰ Such terminology helps us to understand HBO's fictional series and, particularly, its post-1995 market strategy in which auxiliary markets and network syndication are a priority. However, HBO's early cultural programming can also be seen as attempting to mimic the programming of public television. As Santo points out, "As a cable station born into an era that stressed cable's utopian potential for diversity and public service, HBO's programming choices have, in part, been influenced by a public service model of television."³¹ By combining elements of high culture with popular aesthetics, HBO developed programming that could have been at home on public television but was instead used to attract consumers willing to spend money on subscription cable.

Part of HBO's appeal concerned crafting an air of distinction, and much of the programming discussed in this article operates within the discourse of "quality television" either due to the high production values, storytelling techniques, assumptions about viewers, or promotional materials that attempted to market the subscription channel as wholly distinct from network or basic cable television. This discourse is one way that HBO works to justify customers paying subscription fees. As Christopher Anderson notes, "In order to ensure HBO's continuing *economic* value for subscribers, the network must establish a unique *cultural* value among television networks."³² As many scholars acknowledge, HBO productions and the HBO brand often figure in conversations around quality television, so examining how industry journalists and television critics considered these programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s helps us to see how one thread of that conversation around HBO and quality television began—particularly as those conversations intersected with public television's own discourse of quality.³³

In broad terms, this decade of HBO's history of cultural programming can be divided into five distinct and noticeably short periods as cable channels tested programming strategies in waves. From 1978 to 1980, the initial efforts were aimed toward producing original specials rather than solely relying on purchasing Hollywood films. This was followed by a focus on theater and upscale documentaries from 1981 to 1982 and then a noticeable shift toward family programming, as well as adult documentaries, from 1983

30 Avi Santo, "Para-television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO," in Leverette, Ott, and Buckley, *It's Not TV*, 19.

31 Santo, 25.

32 Christopher Anderson, "Overview: Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television," in Edgerton and Jones, *Essential HBO Reader*, 30 (emphasis in the original).

33 For an examination of how HBO scholarship intersects with quality television scholarship, see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

to 1984. Between 1985 and 1987, HBO began to firmly prioritize “big-name” event programs, and by 1988, it had developed a nascent form of its signature strategy of original programming that is still recognizable today.

A FOCUS ON “SPECIALS” AND “MAGAZINE PROGRAMMING,” 1978–1980

In November 1978, HBO announced a \$10 million plan to air sixty new original specials in the coming year, including documentaries, a Broadway theater production, a ventriloquism show, and a jazz concert.³⁴ Advertising proclaimed that “HBO subscribers [could] expect these specials to offer them the same quality entertainment they now get from HBO’s carefully selected movies.” As HBO had worked to distinguish itself as the pay channel with the highest quality Hollywood films, it was important that this brand of “quality” carry over to these specials. In this batch of programs was *The Great Consumer Rip-Off*, HBO’s first documentary to focus on a subject other than sports or entertainment, released in February of 1979.³⁵ Time Inc.’s magazine holdings of *Consumer Reports* served as a model for this sixty-minute informational program, hosted by George Plimpton, which focused on subjects such as false advertising and how to avoid consumer exploitation.

HBO’s strategy during this period fits squarely within the dichotomy of highbrow and lowbrow sensibilities that defined its programming for many years to come. Their reputation for late-night R-rated programming coincided with increasing emphasis on serious-minded and award-winning programming, as illustrated in two programs broadcast between 1979 and 1980. The first, *Time Was* (1979), a six-part documentary series hosted by Dick Cavett, focused on defining figures and events in American history. The second, *Candid Candid Camera* (1980–1981), was an uncensored, adult-oriented version of Allen Funt’s popular network show *Candid Camera* (1948–2014) (see Figure 1).

Yet the mark of “quality” remained key for HBO. Soon after *Time Was* garnered CableACE awards and two awards at the Chicago International Film Festival, HBO decided to cancel *Candid Candid Camera* despite its popularity with subscribers (it would later air on the Playboy Channel and eventually find its way to VHS). In a 1981 *CableVision* interview, Michael Fuchs (then HBO senior vice president of programming) states, “It was one of the most popular original programs we had, but we are pulling it because of image and taste. It is not the type of project with which Time Inc. wants to be associated.”³⁶ By capitalizing on the critical acclaim of programs such as *Time Was*, HBO worked to present itself as a tastemaker uninterested in playing to the lowest common denominator, in part to avoid a frequent criticism of network television. As Fuchs explains in the same interview, “It was our feeling that

34 Barbara Ruger, “Pay in ’79: Kid Stuff, Broadway, and the Video Challenge,” *Cable-Vision*, November 20, 1978, 86. Also see “HBO to Expand Central Region; Adopt New Programming Directions,” *CableVision*, November 20, 1978, 21.

35 “HBO Announces Upcoming Specials, Movies, Sports, and Documentary, to Air in February,” *CableVision*, February 12, 1979, 24–26; and John Alfred Avant, “Avant on ‘The Great Consumer Ripoff,’” *CableVision*, March 12, 1979, 32–36.

36 “HBO Outlines ’81 Specials Strategy,” *CableVision*, January 26, 1981, 14.

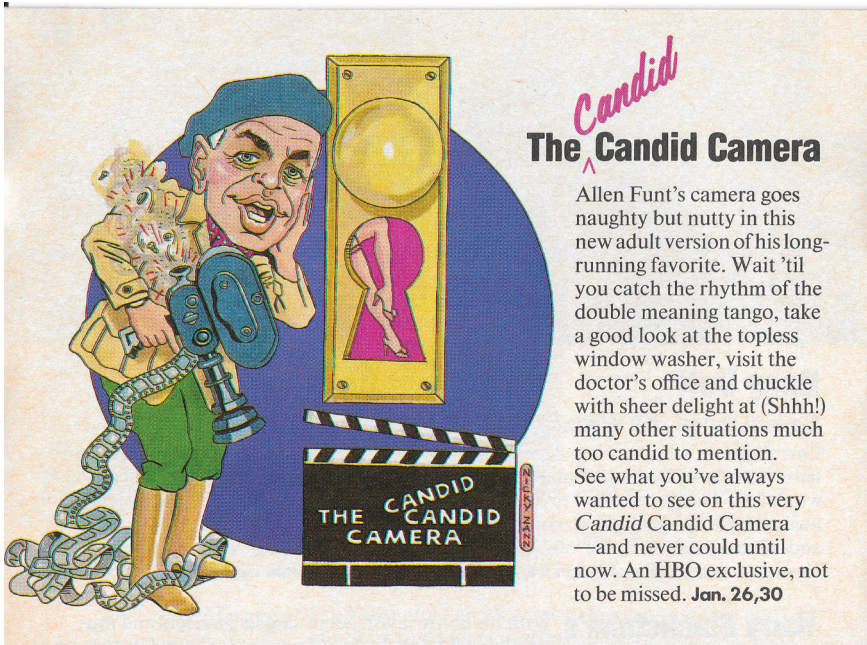


Figure 1. Advertisement for *Candid Candid Camera* (HBO, 1980–1981) in the January 1980 issue of the monthly *HBO Guide* sent to subscribers. The specials were prominently featured in multiple issues across 1980 and 1981 (*HBO Guide*, January 1980).

an expanded version of the network show, which would allow more frankness and adult treatment, was a natural. I very much believe in adult entertainment and adult thought, but dirty isn't funny. We are committed to specials of quality and taste. When is the last time you heard of a commercial network throwing successful series off the air because of taste? We're throwing it off." HBO also found success around this time with its *Consumer Reports* (1980–1996) "magazine format" series, again drawing upon the magazine holdings of its parent company. This combination of award-winning documentaries, successful informational programming, and an increasingly solidified image as a tastemaker rejecting lowbrow television helped shift HBO toward the type of programming that would come to define it as the vanguard cable network we know today.

These programming decisions were not made in isolation, as HBO was, in part, responding to its competition. As James notes about *Time Was*, "drawing on Time's middlebrow mix of prestige and 'superficial appeal' also offered HBO a key point of distinction from chief rival Showtime by 1980," which was known for its offering of erotic films.³⁷ Importantly, though, the commitment to "adult entertainment and adult thought" that was initially the impetus to air *Candid Candid Camera* would remain present in a certain segment of HBO programming with specials such as *Coupling*:

37 James, *HBO*, 65.

Sexual Lifestyles in the 1980s (1980) or the well-known *America Undercover* (1983–2006) series, which became one of HBO’s longest-running series.³⁸ The frank presentation of adult material in series such as *Real Sex* (1990–2009) and *Taxicab Confessions* (1995–2006) would inevitably help to give rise to HBO’s popular entertainment series such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), and *Hung* (2009–2011). Now, of course, HBO has settled on a lucrative balance of adult material, unprecedented critical acclaim, and mainstream success.

Between 1978 and 1980, HBO began to recast its image as a source for exclusive televised sporting events, movies, and award-winning cultural programming. In fact, 1979 was the first year of the CableACE awards, and one of the first awards that HBO took home was for its December 1978 presentation of the Jim Henson production *Emmet Otter’s Jug-Band Christmas* (1977), a Muppet holiday concert special that premiered a year earlier on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).³⁹ By late 1980, HBO hired Betty Bitterman as director of variety programming. A former producer of *The Merv Griffin Show* (NBC, 1962–1963; syndication, 1963–1969; CBS, 1969–1972; syndication, 1972–1986), Bitterman announced that in addition to more variety programs, she was interested in exploring Broadway shows to compete with what rival Showtime was doing.⁴⁰ She saw that the addition of bigger theater productions would fit with the growing lineup of HBO’s comedy, concerts, and documentaries. Drawing upon programming common to public television, HBO’s cultural programming could be seen as simply one part of their broader “magazine programming” and as part of a full-service lineup for subscribers.

DEVELOPING FILMED THEATER AND UPSCALE PROGRAMMING, 1981–1982

With this new approach focused on cultural programming, the total number of HBO’s original productions increased. In 1981, HBO’s budget for original programming was approximately \$25 million, and HBO planned between 165 and 170 productions for that year, with a similar number in 1982. In January 1981, an article in *CableVision* reported that many of these productions were to be “extensions of proven forms such as night club acts and magazine-type programming” and that “HBO however [had] its eyes open for that special form or idea that will really set original programming apart from commercial broadcasting and the efforts of the other pay services.” As HBO’s vice president of programming, Frank Biondi, remarked in the same article, “There’s no magic recipe. It probably comes down to a combination of intuition, timing, and luck.”⁴¹

38 See Susan Murray, “*America Undercover*,” in Edgerton and Jones, *Essential HBO Reader*, 262–273.

39 “Three Aces for HBO in Vegas,” *CableVision*, July 16, 1979, 38–39; John Alfred Avant, “Avant Reviews the 1979 ACE Award Winners,” *CableVision*, July 30, 1979, 37–40; “HBO Sweeps Pay-Cable Categories in 1979 Cablecasting Awards,” HBO advertisement, *CableVision*, July 30, 1979.

40 “Betty Bitterman, Home Box Office,” *CableVision*, September 22, 1980, 85.

41 “HBO, Showtime Refine Original Programming Policies,” *CableVision*, January 5, 1981, 17–18.

After testing the waters with four formats—a magazine show, a historical documentary, a children’s special, and a lewd prank show—HBO kept the first three and jettisoned the fourth to focus on cultural or highbrow programming. As Barbara Ruger (New York bureau chief for *CableVision*) wrote at the time, “1981 may well go down in programming annals as the year the cable television viewer was introduced—perhaps inundated—with cultural, upscale programming.”⁴² Industry reporters noted that HBO, Showtime, ARTS, Bravo, Bluebird, the Entertainment Channel, CBS Cable, and others were all exploring this “upscale programming” that might have traditionally been found on public broadcasting.⁴³ As HBO’s Fuchs noted in an address to the New York Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, HBO wanted to distance itself from violence and nudity and be at the “forefront of a new direction” with a focus on filmed theater. He remarked, “We’d like to add a knob to the TV marked ‘intelligence.’”⁴⁴

HBO was not, of course, the first to try this. Network television has a long history of offering “upscale” or “highbrow” cultural programming in the public interest. In the early 1950s, NBC created educational shows for children under the banner of “Enlightenment Through Entertainment”; a group of television documentaries called *telementaries* dubbed “Operation Wisdom”; and a broader umbrella initiative called “Operation Frontal Lobes,” which was a grand design for television as both public service and profitable industry.⁴⁵ Similarly, the *Omnibus* series (CBS, 1952–1956; ABC, 1956–1957; NBC, 1957–1961), hosted by Alistair Cooke, was a mixture of highbrow and middlebrow programming offering “everything from figure skating to a Gertrude Stein play, from a profile of Harpo Marx to *Anti-gone*.”⁴⁶ From 1961 to 1962, there was a dramatic increase of documentary programming as more than 250 hours of nonfiction programming (some four hundred programs) were aired on the three networks. The impetus for this shift is most often attributed to Newton Minow’s “vast wasteland” speech as well as what Michael Curtin notes was “an explicit attempt to mobilize public opinion behind a more activist foreign policy” during the Kennedy administration.⁴⁷ These documentaries, anthology series, and filmed theater performances all found a place on network and public television long before HBO followed suit.

In 1981, HBO hired a successful Broadway producer, Arthur Whitelaw, as director of theater development, a position hard to imagine just two or

42 Barbara Ruger, “Cultural, Yes, But Will It Sell?,” *CableVision*, January 5, 1981, 44.

43 Jeri Baker, “Lively Arts Spur Lively Debate—Clash of Cultures,” *CableVision*, June 29, 1981, 40–45; and Jeri Baker, “Turning on a Dime,” *CableVision*, February 15, 1982, 15–19.

44 *CableVision*, July 13, 1981, 22.

45 See Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 159–160; and Pamela Wilson, “NBC Television’s ‘Operation Frontal Lobes’: Cultural Hegemony and Fifties’ Program Planning,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 15, no. 1 (1995): 83–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689500260051>.

46 James Ledbetter, *Made Possible By . . . : The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States* (New York: Verso, 1997), 41.

47 Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3.



Figure 2. Publicity still for *Camelot* (Home Box Office, 1982).

three years earlier, when Hollywood films and sports largely dominated the schedule.⁴⁸ Whitelaw stated that HBO's theater offerings would "take time to build an audience, doing it mostly with major plays and major stars."⁴⁹ The plan was to ramp up to broadcasting one play a month once HBO began its twenty-four-hour programming schedule on January 1, 1982. Whitelaw noted that after the initial offerings of big plays and big stars, HBO would try out new playwrights and regional theater productions. Some of the first examples were *Vanities* (Gary Halvorson, 1981), starring Meredith Baxter and Annette O'Toole; *Sherlock Holmes* (Peter H. Hunt, 1981), starring Frank Langella; and *Camelot* (Marty Callner, 1982), starring Richard Harris (see Figure 2). *New York Times* television critic John J. O'Connor wrote at the time that the production of *Sherlock Holmes* "offers a neat illustration of what is happening in the crucial area of entertainment distribution. A few years ago, this production would have been seen on public television, perhaps as part of a WNET-TV, Channel 13 package on regional theatre."⁵⁰

It is easy to see the logic of HBO's hedge. The channel was not producing and airing filmed theater due to a sense of public service duty or a philosophical commitment to cultural programming (though it did send

48 *CableVision*, November 3, 1980, 60.

49 Quoted in Simon Applebaum, "Performing Arts Groups Explore Prospects in Cable's Cultural Act," *CableVision*, June 22, 1981, 27.

50 John J. O'Connor, "TV: H.B.O. Offers 'Sherlock Holmes,'" *New York Times*, November 19, 1981.

study guides for *Camelot* to 150,000 junior and high school teachers).⁵¹ Instead, filmed theater was an inexpensive way to fill part of its twenty-four-hour programming schedule, and relying on well-known productions and stars was another potential avenue to attract subscribers. Of course, this is not to understate the amount of money that HBO was spending on some of these productions. For example, HBO paid over \$1 million for the cablecast, foreign television distribution, and home video rights for *Camelot*, and the production's full budget was somewhere between \$3 million and \$3.5 million.⁵² Filmed theater surprisingly became quite the commodity in the cable landscape, and in 1981 and 1982, the market was becoming saturated with theatrical content. The major cable channels increased their theatrical productions, and Broadway producers and playwrights encountered bidding wars for their properties.⁵³ Other HBO filmed theater productions during 1981 and 1982 included *Barefoot in the Park* (Harvey Medlinsky, 1981), *Bus Stop* (Peter H. Hunt, 1982), *Wait Until Dark* (Barry Davis, 1982), and *Plaza Suite* (Harvey Medlinsky, 1982).

It was during this time that HBO continued its *Consumer Reports* specials and followed up the successful *Time Was* series with the similarly named *Remember When . . .* (1981–1985).⁵⁴ For both of these award-winning documentaries, HBO sent videocassettes and educational materials to classrooms across the country, with *Remember When* even being promoted by the National Education Association.⁵⁵ There were collaborations with *Ms.* magazine, such as the documentary *She's Nobody's Baby* (Ana Carrigan, 1981), which won HBO (and cable television) its first Peabody Award, and educational science programs, including *What On Earth?* (1981). Despite the emphasis on cultural and educational programming, other more risqué documentaries on subjects such as sex therapists (*Sex Is a Three Letter Word* [1982]), circus sideshows (*Some Call Them . . . Freaks* [Greg Stanton, 1981]), and death row inmates (*Deathwatch: Six Who Wait* [1981]) rounded out HBO's documentary offerings and demonstrated that HBO still maintained a selection of programs that aligned with its "adult" reputation. By the end of 1982, HBO was ten years old, had eleven million subscribers, and had solidified its place as a leader in cable television. HBO now had a variety of original productions in addition to its staple of popular Hollywood films and award-winning sports programming.

51 Eric Taub, "Happily Ever After: Will the Magic of Broadway Cast as Sweet a Spell on Cable?," *CableVision*, August 16, 1982, 14–18.

52 Simon Applebaum, "HBO Offers 'Camelot,'" *CableVision*, August, 31, 1981, 16.

53 John Duka, "Cable TV Turns Hungrily to the Theater," *New York Times*, June 27, 1982; and Patricia Goldstone, "Cable Goes Legit: Focus of Original Programming Shifts from Las Vegas to Broadway," *CableVision*, March 29, 1982, 4–18.

54 "NEA Promotes HBO Series," *CableVision*, August 24, 1981, 43; and Susan Spillman, "HBO Launches Outreach Program for Its 'Remember When' Series," *CableVision*, May 4, 1982, 21.

55 Jean Bergantini Grillo, "'Remember When,' HBO Discovers Impact Is Using Educational Emphasis in Program Marketing Approach," *CableVision*, April 5, 1982, 34. Additionally, HBO also won the Clarion Award from the Association for Women in Communications for *Remember When* and the *Consumer Reports* series. HBO also continued to send free videocassettes of select cultural programming to schools well into the late 1980s.

EMPHASIZING PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, 1983–1984

During the 1983–1984 season, HBO (and cable more broadly) began to significantly ramp up production of children’s programming. Cable television was seen by many as the way that for-profit television could serve children with educational programming without having to rely on public funding, unlike PBS. As early as 1978, Ruger wrote, “If there is one audience that has been long neglected by commercial television, it is children. In the early seventies, public broadcasting, with a healthy dose of federal funds from HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], assumed the burden of providing responsible children’s programming. Increasingly, however, cable television is being looked to as the medium that can address the special programming needs of children.”⁵⁶ Cable channels dedicated to children’s programming began in earnest with Calliope in 1978 and Nickelodeon in 1979, while existing cable channels including HBO and Showtime devoted portions of their schedule to children’s (or at least family-friendly) programming. In 1981, for example, HBO struck a deal with Disney to create a “Family Programming Window” from 5:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. every day.⁵⁷

In January of 1983, HBO aired its first breakout hit for children, *Fraggle Rock* (see Figure 3).⁵⁸ Featuring the playful, radish-loving Fraggles and the work-oriented Doozers, this Muppet show was accompanied by educational study guides and won numerous awards.⁵⁹ Interestingly, though, *Fraggle Rock* raises questions about what it means to be an original series on HBO. In fact, in its second collaboration with Henson, HBO did not finance or have any creative input with the series.⁶⁰ The show was a Henson Associates, Inc., and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation co-production taped in Toronto at the CBC studios; HBO had exclusive licensing for airing the program in the United States.⁶¹ Despite the financing structure, *Fraggle Rock* was often described in HBO advertising, industry journals, and popular criticism as HBO’s first original weekly series.

The term *original series* was used differently by each cable network, and this ambiguity was the topic of a feature article in *CableVision* by Jean Bergantini Grillo. The article quotes the Entertainment Channel’s programming vice president, Arnold Huberman, stating that for the channel, original series “means the pay service solely financed it without any partners.” Alternatively, HBO’s Fuchs said, “Where the money comes from isn’t important to us. The less money I spend, the better I feel. I’m more concerned with quality.” While HBO was “involved with *Fraggle Rock* from day one,” according to Fuchs, this did not mean a financial investment because “once you’re involved finan-

56 Barbara Ruger, “Warner Cable’s Bold Plan for Improving Children’s Television,” *CableVision*, December 4, 1978, 153.

57 Simon Applebaum, “HBO to Feature Disney Fare,” *CableVision*, January 12, 1981, 30.

58 John J. O’Connor, “First the Muppets, Now the Fraggles,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1983.

59 “‘Fraggle Rock’ Study Guide to Be Released,” *CableVision*, February 27, 1984, 12.

60 Jean Bergantini Grillo, “Program Semantics, Services Offer Definitions of Original Made-for-Pay Cable Series,” *CableVision*, September 6, 1982, 27.

61 Jean Bergantini Grillo, “Fraggle Attack, Jim Henson’s Furry Creatures Debut Exclusively on HBO Jan. 10,” *CableVision*, January 10, 1983, 63.



Figure 3. Publicity still for *Fraggle Rock* (Home Box Office, 1983–1987).

cially, you're involved creatively and Jim (Henson) doesn't need that."⁶² For Fuchs and HBO, what mattered was the exclusivity. To watch *Fraggle Rock* in the United States, viewers would need to subscribe to HBO. The parallels between the *Fraggle Rock* distribution deal and the present-day *Sesame Street* deal are clear. Both shows involve a private company (Henson Associates, Inc., or CTW) and a public television service (CBC or PBS) working with a cable network (HBO) to produce and distribute programming. The difference is licensing structure. With *Fraggle Rock*, the CBC had sole Canadian rights for several years, and HBO would air each episode in the United States about two weeks before the CBC airdate. With *Sesame Street*, HBO currently airs episodes nine months earlier than they would air on PBS. In each case,

62 Bergantini Grillo, "Program Semantics," 27.

HBO benefited from a window of exclusivity that would presumably gain or retain subscribers interested in these children's programs.

At least one television critic in 1983 saw *Fraggle Rock* as consistent with HBO's programming strategy at the time. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* wrote:

It hardly flies in the face of precedent that the first weekly series on HBO would be produced in another country, and not a mythical one either (Canada), and be the product of a proven commercial powerhouse, not the brainstorm of some newly discovered innovator. HBO always plays it safe. It is only a partner in *Fraggle Rock*, one cog in a byzantine financing scheme, and the programs come complete with spaces for commercials if the series plays in other countries or, in the future, on free TV in this one. But none of that detracts from the fact that *Fraggle Rock* looks to be a lovely place to visit after dinner.⁶³

With this licensing structure, HBO continued a strategy that had worked well for them in the past: identify a quality program, purchase the license to run it on its channel, reap the benefits of critical acclaim, and hopefully see an increase to its subscription base.

The premiere of *Fraggle Rock* would mark the beginning of a new phase of HBO's family programming, and two months later HBO aired its first in-house production of this sort, *Braingames* (1983–1985), eventually winning a CableACE award for those efforts.⁶⁴ HBO also aired a filmed performance of *Puss 'n Boots* (1981) in collaboration with the famed Children's Theatre Company. *Puss 'n Boots* had made-for-television on-location and studio scenes interspersed into a live onstage production with actors dressed in animal costumes. Unfortunately, HBO's off-peak time slot of 6:00 a.m. rather than the late-afternoon and early-evening time slots it primarily used with other family programs contributed to *Puss 'n Boots* failing to generate widespread viewership or acclaim, despite a good review in *CableVision* that claimed the program was largely "hidden away" in HBO's schedule.⁶⁵

During this period, HBO had significant competition for children's viewership. By 1983, for example, cable channels were winning more Action for Children's Television (ACT) Awards than broadcast networks were.⁶⁶ Showtime's successful series *Shelley Duvall's Faerie Tale Theatre* (1982–1987) consistently won awards and high praise from audiences and critics alike, and Nickelodeon was solidifying its place in the viewing habits of children across the country.⁶⁷ The Disney Channel joined this crowded space in April of 1983, and even ESPN and the Weather Channel planned programming spe-

63 Tom Shales, "The Fraggle Factor," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1983.

64 *CableVision*, February 21, 1983, 11, and January 9, 1984, 11.

65 Robert DiMatteo, "'Puss 'n Boots' Is Hidden Away in HBO's Schedule," *CableVision*, November 28, 1983, 26.

66 Simon Applebaum, "The Woman behind the Influence," *CableVision*, January 23, 1984, 56–63.

67 Peter Kerr, "Is Children's Fare Paying Its Way?," *New York Times*, November 20, 1983.

cifically targeting children.⁶⁸ In 1984, HBO further increased its own family programming, partnering with *ABC Afterschool Special* (1972–1997) and NBC's *Project Peacock*, as well as the Learning Corporation of America, to air popular teenage fiction specials for the *HBO Family Playhouse* series (1984–1990).⁶⁹

From 1983 to 1984, HBO increased family programming while also continuing to produce documentaries for adults. As one *CableVision* story noted, “[HBO], while still committed to broadly-based, family-oriented programming . . . [will air] an array of shows, finished or in development, dealing with sexual mores, prostitution, gun ownership, women murderers and ‘salty’ comedians.” While being careful to avoid the “adult” distinction of the Playboy Channel or Eros, HBO and other cable networks were now pushing programming to “adult viewers with thought-provoking, entertaining and decidedly mature shows best described as ‘grown-up TV.’”⁷⁰ While the more sexually explicit *Eros America* series (planned for HBO but eventually used for HBO's Cinemax offshoot in 1983) received most of the scrutiny at the time, television documentaries such as *Hooker* (Robert Niemack, 1983), about prostitution; *Growing Up Stoned* (Robert Niemack, 1984), about substance dependency; and *Soldiers in Hiding* (Malcolm Clarke, 1985), about the struggles of Vietnam veterans, better represent the shift toward “adult documentaries” of this period.⁷¹

The wave of filmed theater began to crest at HBO and across most subscription cable networks in late 1983 and early 1984.⁷² Arthur Whitelaw left his position as director of theater development at HBO in 1983, and the channel began to de-emphasize filmed theater productions, focusing instead on short films adapted from plays.⁷³ These made-for-television versions of plays such as *The Deadly Game* (George Schaefer, 1982), *Mr. Halpern and Mr. Johnson* (Alvin Rakoff, 1983), and *Separate Tables* (John Schlesinger, 1983) were better received by critics than the plays filmed onstage and won numerous CableACE awards. Tom Shales writes of *The Deadly Game* in comparison to the earlier plays: “The reason [*The Deadly Game*] works so well as television is that it is television—not another of HBO's dreadfully half-baked photographed plays. HBO has insisted in the past that these plays be taped on a stage in front of an audience, an artistic decision comparable to ordering all the Rockettes to put on cellulite. It adds an obstacle between the viewer and the viewed. Camera positions are drastically limited, close-ups are

68 Jean Bergantini Grillo, “Kids Stuff,” *CableVision*, March 21, 1983, 58–68.

69 *CableVision*, March 12, 1984, 26. Also see Leslie Garisto, “Expanding the Scope of Children's Fare,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1984.

70 Jean Bergantini Grillo, “Pay Services ‘Grow Up,’ HBO, Showtime and Bravo Develop ‘Provocative’ and ‘Hard-Hitting’ Fare to Meet Demand,” *CableVision*, March 4, 1983, 52.

71 See Thomas A. Mascaro, “Overview: Form and Function,” and Jeffery P. Jones, “Erotica,” both in Edgerton and Jones, *Essential HBO Reader*, 239–261 and 274–287, respectively.

72 For more on the history of filmed theater on television, see Brian G. Rose, *Television and the Performing Arts: A Handbook and Reference Guide to American Cultural Programming* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

73 *CableVision*, April 18, 1983, 24; and Jean Bergantini Grillo, “The Final Act? Theater's Boom on Cable May Have Come and Gone While Many People Were Waiting for It to Begin,” *CableVision*, July 11, 1983, 78–84.

few and the actors all stalk around braying out dialogue using stage projection.”⁷⁴ O’Connor similarly praised this change in format in his review of *Separate Tables* and *Mr. Halpern and Mr. Johnson*, writing, “[with] shades of public television, the service has dabbled in several first-rate imports” that were “virtually flawless.”⁷⁵ Although HBO discontinued filmed theater, some cable channels continued to emphasize it. Showtime’s “Broadway on Showtime” produced joint ventures with PBS under the “Great Performances” banner, such as *Master Harold . . . and the Boys* (Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1985) and *Heartbreak House* (Anthony Page, 1985), and as late as 1985, A&E aired a production of *Swan Lake*, and Bravo aired a production of *Carmen*.

While HBO moved away from filmed theater, it continued to support playwrights (and scout new talent) by giving away significant grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000 between 1983 and 1985, and HBO donated tapes of its filmed theater performances to the New York Public Library for future enjoyment and study.⁷⁶ As Whitelaw said in an interview after his exit from HBO, “The theatre programming was their prestige programming. It gave them clout within the industry, in the press, and gave them exposure they wouldn’t normally have had.”⁷⁷ It was the cultural programming winning most of the awards, not the Hollywood films.

HBO also continued other experiments with original programming. In 1983, the channel shot and aired a pilot for its first sitcom, *Over Here, Mr. President*, about the White House Press Corps (see Figure 4). The show was not picked up for additional episodes, but in 1984, HBO premiered a popular sports-focused sitcom, *1st & Ten*, which would run until 1991.⁷⁸ By the summer of 1985, HBO had officially moved on from “theatrical presentations” to focus on “original dramas for television . . . designed for in-home entertainment.” Bridget Potter, HBO’s senior vice president for original programming, noted, “We tried translating the experience of a theatre to the small screen, but it didn’t work. Then we tried using traditional television techniques to help make the material suit the medium, but it still didn’t work. Our audience said they wanted it, but they didn’t use it.” As HBO moved on, however, Showtime announced that it would continue to focus on filmed theater for at least another year, with six new plays in 1986.⁷⁹

74 Tom Shales, “HBO’s Grand ‘Game,’” *Washington Post*, July 24, 1982.

75 John J. O’Connor, “Impressive Acting and Heftier Scripts Were High Points,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1983.

76 Bernard Holland, “Nonprofit Theater Group Gets a \$25,000 Grant,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1983, C14; “Playwright’s Fund,” *CableVision*, March 14, 1983, 9; “HBO Gives \$25,000 to TCG to Boost Play Publication,” *Variety*, March 9, 1983; and “On the Record,” *CableVision*, April 11, 1983, 10.

77 Kirsten Beck, *Cultivating the Wasteland* (New York: American Council for the Arts, 1983), 57.

78 Eric Taub, “HBO’s Situation Comedy, Pay Service Strikes Deal with Lorimar, Resulting in Political Satire, ‘Over Here, Mr. President,’” *CableVision*, August 1, 1983, 24–25; and Eric Taub, “Maturing via Originals, Pay Networks Learning Intricacies of Creating New Shows by Trial and Error Basis,” *CableVision*, October 31, 1983, 29.

79 Steve Schneider, “Theatre Meets with Varying Success on the Home Screen,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1985. Also see Richard Hummler, “Legit Cable Hopes Didn’t Pan Out, But Showtime Likes ‘B’way’ Series; HBO Wants More Original Dramas,” *Variety*, May 29, 1985.



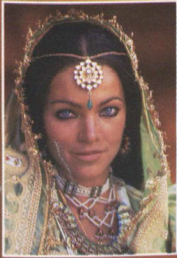
Figure 4. Publicity still from the pilot episode of *Over Here, Mr. President* (Home Box Office, 1983).

In 1984, PBS collaborated with the newly launched A&E to present the BBC One television film *An Englishman Abroad*, directed by John Schlesinger. A&E gave the film its American television premiere on cable, and PBS presented it as part of its Great Performances series one month later.⁸⁰ This was billed as the first-ever cable/public television joint premiere.⁸¹ HBO subsequently began its own collaborations with the BBC, setting the stage for its future “big-name” event productions with the \$12 million epic *The Far Pavilions* (Peter Duffell, 1984), a Goldcrest/HBO production that was seen to be in the style of *Masterpiece Theatre* (PBS, 1971–; see Figure 5).⁸² While the ratings were strong, it received mixed reviews from critics.⁸³ O’Connor of the *New York Times* wrote of the series:

The ingredients are certainly promising for whipping up the kind of sweeping epic that often brings in healthy television ratings. . . .

- 80 Robert DiMatteo, “HBO’s ‘The Guardian’; an A&E/PBS Premiere,” *CableVision*, November 12, 1984, 24. In 1984, ARTS and the Entertainment Channel merged and launched Arts & Entertainment (A&E). A&E took over the remainder of the ten-year content deal that the Entertainment Channel made with BBC. See Cecelia Capuzzi, “A&E Culture on Cable,” *CableVision*, March 12, 1984, 39–44.
- 81 Tom Shales, “Chatting with a Spy,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 1984; and Aljean Hargetz, “TV Film Offers Rare Glimpse of British Defector,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1984.
- 82 “HBO in Negotiations with the BBC,” *CableVision*, April 18, 1983, 12.
- 83 “HBO’s ‘Pavilions’ Scores in Ratings,” *CableVision*, May 7, 1984, 11; Steve Knoll, “Getting on the Mini-Series Bandwagon,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1984; and “HBO’s ‘Pavilions’ Tops Ratings Despite Its Lackluster Reviews,” *Variety*, May 2, 1984.

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Why then is it so boring? . . . “The Far Pavilions” is especially disappointing because it would have been reassuring to find that an organization such as Home Box Office might be able to produce an occasional mini-series of unquestioned quality. But HBO shows distinct and disturbing signs of being no more committed to true artistic achievement than, in the general run of things, are the commercial networks.⁸⁴

Fuchs, frustrated by the reviews, wrote that when this kind of production is on public broadcasting like the BBC or PBS, it is a “great service,” but when it is on HBO, it is “plodding.” Despite such reviews, HBO’s original productions, or “made-fors,” were “outperforming licensed theatrical films, both in terms of tune-in and satisfaction.”⁸⁵ Ultimately, HBO was not dependent upon the success or failure of a single production like *The Far Pavilions*, a concert, or a comedy special. As Fuchs notes in the same interview, “If we get burnt once a year, we’ll take that risk.”

Once again, HBO’s approach to risk resulted in a co-production with a known producer and utilized famous actors, literary properties, and historical events that were likely to appeal to their subscriber base. That formula began to solidify in the upcoming years, and big-name and big-budget BBC/HBO collaborations continue to this day, with series and films such as *Rome* (2005–2007), *The Girl in the Café* (David Yates, 2005), *Five Days* (2007–2010), *House of Saddam* (2008), *Parade’s End* (2012), and *His Dark Materials* (2019–).⁸⁶ As these examples make clear, HBO’s partnerships have a long-established history and did not recently materialize out of nowhere. By assembling a history of these early programming decisions, we are better able to understand HBO’s contemporary collaborations in an appropriate context.

SETTLING ON A SAFE WINNING FORMULA WITH BIG-NAME EVENTS, 1985–1988

By 1985, the national cable penetration rate had risen to 45.3 percent (a 7 percent increase from the previous year), and HBO had established itself as a home for cultural programming on cable boxes across the country.⁸⁷ In an advertisement, HBO touted this by noting that 70 percent of HBO subscribers said “family programming is a key reason for subscribing.”⁸⁸ Remarkably, this is only a few years after it developed a somewhat maligned reputation as the go-to channel for late-night nudity. The accolades continued to accumulate for HBO’s family programming, as both *Fraggle Rock* and *Braingames* won ACT Awards in 1985.⁸⁹ This shift from racy entertainment toward “family-

84 John J. O’Connor, “HBO’s ‘Far Pavilions’ Falls Short,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1984.

85 Eric Taub, “HBO Unswayed by Critics,” *CableVision*, June 18, 1984, 30.

86 For more on the co-production deal between HBO, BBC, and Rai Italia, see Andrew B. R. Elliott, “Rewriting European History: National and Transnational Identities in *Rome*,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 33, no. 4 (2013): 576–593, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2013.847653>.

87 “National Cable Penetration Rate Hits 45.3%,” *CableVision*, June 17, 1985, 12.

88 “No One Keeps Families Tuned in Like You and HBO,” HBO Advertisement, *Cable-Vision*, October 14, 1985.

89 “ACT Makes Achievement Awards,” *CableVision*, May 27, 1985, 18.

friendly” or “quality” programming coincided, of course, with Reagan-era conservatism and the rise of the religious right’s campaigns against popular media deemed detrimental to “family values.”

After winning its ACT Awards, HBO ran a full-page ad in the May 8, 1986, issue of *CableVision* with the headline “Kids & TV: Taking Control of the Controls.” The ad copy avoids mentioning the award itself and instead focuses on the sense of familial responsibility and guidance for children: “It is in your hands to determine what your children watch. You may find it helpful to take advantage of the insights and information gathered by concerned groups like Action for Children’s Television. For example, ACT recommends that kids watch no more than 10 hours of television weekly. They also suggest you teach youngsters to watch *specific* programs, not just to watch television.”⁹⁰ The ad continues by stating that HBO shares the concerns and responsibilities of parents when it comes to children watching television and provides more than forty family and children’s shows every month. In this ad, HBO saw itself appealing to discerning subscribers and providing a kid-friendly oasis during particular hours of the day. After all, if the ACT recommended that parents teach children to “watch *specific* programs,” the ad seems to imply that families should watch one of the many family programming options on HBO.

HBO’s family-friendly programming blocks continued to expand during this period.⁹¹ In April of 1985, the channel announced the “HBO Family Program Festival,” which included twenty-five additional hours of family programming on top of the eighty-two already scheduled for the previous month.⁹² HBO also acquired twenty-six family programs from syndication company Orbis Communications Inc. in a two-year exclusive licensing deal—the largest package of family programs purchased by HBO to date.⁹³ This package of *Orbis Family Specials* included twenty-four half-hour specials and two feature-length films. In the summer of 1985, HBO announced that *Fraggle Rock* was renewed for an additional twenty-four new episodes, taking it into 1986, and HBO eventually would win a CableACE Award for the show in 1987.⁹⁴ Combined with the Peabody Award for *Braingames*, it became clear that family programming would be a central and successful part of HBO’s schedule for quite some time.⁹⁵

It was within this context that HBO launched a cheaper add-on channel called HBO Festival in select markets during the spring and summer of 1986. This new channel would be “dominated by G- and PG-rated films and relatively non-controversial specials” but would also show some “selected R-rated films,” with some being “alternate studio versions featuring toned-down

90 “Kids & TV: Taking Control of the Controls,” HBO Advertisement, *CableVision*, May 8, 1986 (emphasis in the original).

91 Steve Schneider, “Along with the Familiar, Cable Seeks Distinctive Fare,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1985.

92 *CableVision*, April 8, 1985, 23.

93 *CableVision*, September 1, 1986, 39.

94 John Motavalli, “HBO Continues Its ACE Dominance with Award Total Topping 1986,” *CableVision*, February 2, 1987, 24.

95 *CableVision*, June 23, 1986, 24.

violence and/or sexual content.”⁹⁶ This cheaper option would extend their brand identification to an additional audience while preserving the exclusivity of the main pay channel. Cable subscribers who wanted new Hollywood films and boxing matches would still need to pay for the full HBO channel, but so would audiences who wanted higher-profile family programming, such as HBO’s new, hour-long Henson “family picture-book special,” *The Tale of the Bunny Picnic* (Jim Henson and David Hillier, 1986).⁹⁷

HBO Festival never quite made it to a mass market, and it was canceled in 1988 only one year after it was launched. With a seven-dollar-per-month price point and concerns from cable operators about pay cable saturation, HBO Festival only reached about 50,000 subscribers (or about 5 percent of the subscribers in the one hundred cable systems that carried the service)—about half of the target number that HBO was hoping for.⁹⁸ This echoed an earlier attempt at an HBO offshoot channel, *Take 2*, similarly focused on G- and PG-rated programming. *Take 2* was announced in December of 1978, launched in April of 1979, and promptly shut down just a year later, when HBO launched its Cinemax “second-service” feed in the summer of 1980.⁹⁹

In 1985, HBO’s Potter announced the channel’s “Showcase ’86” strategy of big-event movies, comics, and concerts for the upcoming year. Each month would have marquee productions and original series offerings.¹⁰⁰ This focus on original programming was not isolated to HBO. As one *CableVision* writer put it in December of 1985, “if cable networks want to keep their hold on the television market, they have to be ready to spend plenty of money on original programming, industry leaders have been told.”¹⁰¹ This was in part due to the rise of VCRs competing with pay cable. As Fuchs noted of this Showcase ’86 strategy, “the current marketplace impact of VCR has made us look at our business differently, focusing also on the kind of entertainment that consumers can’t see at movie theaters, video stores or on broadcast television.”¹⁰²

By 1987, HBO’s advertising strategy was squarely focused on promoting its original programming lineup. This included award-winning family programming; big-name comedy specials and benefit shows such as *Comic*

96 John Motavalli, “HBO Targets Festival Toward Older Audiences,” *CableVision*, March 3, 1986, 44; “Home Box Office Gives Festival Family Film Service a Trial Run,” *Variety*, February 19, 1986; and “HBO Offers Wholesome ‘Festival’ of Early Films for New Service,” *Variety*, May 20, 1987.

97 *CableVision*, February 24, 1986, 24; and “HBO, Brits Join on Kiddie Specs; ‘Witch’ & ‘Bunny,’” *Variety*, February 19, 1986.

98 Wayne Friedman, “Festival, HBO Pulls Plug on Pay Channel, Citing Marketing, Capacity Problems,” *CableVision*, August 1, 1988, 26

99 See “Take 2 advertisement,” *CableVision*, December 4, 1978; “HBO Does ‘Landslide’ Business in Anaheim; Announces *Take-2* Mini Pay,” *CableVision*, January 1, 1979; *CableVision*, May 21, 1979, 188; *CableVision*, May 19, 1980, 15; Jeri Baker, “Cinemax, HBO’s Strapping Little Sister, Turns One Year Old,” *CableVision*, August 3, 1981, 45–50; and Wayne Friedman, “HBO at 15: The Precocious Child of Cable Faces Maturity,” *CableVision*, December 7, 1987, 48.

100 John Motavalli, “Comedy, Music Highlight HBO’s ’86 Schedule,” *CableVision*, December 2, 1985, 54; and “HBO Launches ‘Showcase ’86,” *Variety*, October 23, 1985.

101 John Motavalli, “Original Programming Key for Pay Cable’s Growth,” *CableVision*, December 16, 1985, 24–26.

102 John J. O’Connor, “TV View; HBO’s New ‘Showcase’ Displays Promise,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1986.

Relief (1986–); concert specials featuring performers such as Tina Turner; and big-event films such as the dramatic biopics *Sakharov* (Jack Gold, 1984), *Murrow* (Jack Gold, 1986), and *Mandela* (Philip Saville, 1987).¹⁰³ The latter category of biopics remains closely associated with HBO to this day. The one-name titles here speak to the strategy: choose a historical or contemporary figure or event, attract well-known stars and directors, and lean into heavy marketing and awards campaigning to play up a sense of importance and commitment to bringing these stories to the discerning audience of subscribers. This strategy becomes explicit in HBO's 1987–1988 advertising campaign, with headlines such as “Who makes the movies about the people who move the world?” and “Who Brings Today's Real-Life Issues to Life?” or “Who's Causing a Revolution in Big Event Television?”¹⁰⁴ Such films did not always receive great reviews, but the strategy generated industry notice and subscription increases.

When HBO dominated the 1987 CableACE Awards (winning thirty-four awards), it became clear this strategy was working. In fact, a headline in *CableVision* stated, “Programming Strategy Commitment Is Paying Off for Fuchs and HBO.” In the article, John Motavalli writes, “HBO is now firmly wedded to the ‘big events’ strategy, and is exploring new ways to keep the concept fresh.”¹⁰⁵ Fuchs notes HBO's decision to phase out *Fraggle Rock* and *Not Necessarily the News* (1983–1990) and indicated that they would continue making biographies and docudramas, predicting that the channel would make up to ten films in 1987 with an average budget of \$4 million to \$5 million per film. HBO comedy programs and concert specials would see increased budgets and promotion with even bigger names, such as Billy Crystal and Cyndi Lauper. The years of experimentation had paid off, cementing the formula that we have come to know.

It is instructive to look back at the summer of 1986, when former director of documentary programming Sheila Nevins returned to HBO after some time away. In an interview with *Variety*, Potter said of Nevins's new role as vice president of documentary and family programming that she was not there to “add more shows, but to give the [documentary] and family shows higher visibility. HBO is no longer interested . . . in producing some 40 original reality shows a year to fill in bare spots . . . [but to aim more for] impact than for volume.”¹⁰⁶ With this new strategy in place, HBO continued to focus on incubating original content and sourced it from familiar wells. In February of 1987, HBO granted \$180,000 to the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center for the “support and development of young playwrights” through the HBO Writer's Award.¹⁰⁷ The intention was

103 HBO advertising campaign in *CableVision*: September 14, 1987; November 9, 1987; and November 23, 1987.

104 HBO advertising campaign in *CableVision*: September 14, 1987; May 9, 1988; and October 24, 1988.

105 John Motavalli, “Programming Strategy Commitment Is Paying Off for Fuchs and HBO,” *CableVision*, April 13, 1987, 22.

106 “HBO Beefs Up Original Shows; Brings Back Nevins to Do Job,” *Variety*, May 28, 1986.

107 *CableVision*, February 19, 1987, 19. Also see Carolyn Battista, “Introducing Playwrights to Television Cameras,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1987.

to use this as a talent development competition and produce the winning play for broadcast in each of the next three years. HBO also collaborated with CTW to produce twenty-four half-hour episodes of *Encyclopedia*, which were designed to appeal to the six- to eleven-year-old age bracket and would air exclusively on HBO.¹⁰⁸ Later that year, HBO won an Ollie Award from the American Children's Television Festival for the *HBO Family Playhouse* film special *The Truth About Alex* (Paul Shapiro, 1986), in which a young high school student is outed as gay and manages the resulting complications with his friends.¹⁰⁹

Clearly, the silver bullet for HBO's success was not going to simply be children's programming, filmed theater, or even the concerts or comedy specials alone. However, the awards and critical acclaim from the serious-minded cultural programming informed the approach that HBO took with its "top of the marquee" historical biopics. The emphasis on important figures or events in history and the appeal to prestige viewers and critical acclaim found in much of the channel's cultural programming would become an ever-present element of HBO's formula for producing original films. From the earliest entry of *The Terry Fox Story* (Ralph L. Thomas, 1983), this formula remains to this day, with films such as *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (Martha Coolidge, 1999), *The Notorious Bettie Page* (Mary Harron, 2005), *Phil Spector* (David Mamet, 2013), and many others.¹¹⁰

HBO PRESENTS "SIMPLY THE BEST," 1988

By 1988, HBO relied heavily on original cultural programming to round out its schedule of Hollywood films and big-name boxing matches. In doing so, HBO was not striking out on a path that was radically different from other cable channels, which were also experimenting with cultural programming. Within this context, HBO sought to distinguish itself by focusing on carefully curated, high-impact cultural programming, an approach soon emphasized by its 1989 network slogan: "Simply the Best."

As many of these cable channels replicated programming styles often found on PBS, the existential threat to public television was conveyed by PBS president Bruce Christensen in a public address to the National Association of Television Arts and Sciences: "I'm not crying wolf when I say this is a life-or-death issue with public television. We have to mount a concentrated campaign to turn this situation around. Unfortunately, most major cable companies are not sympathetic to our pleas. They've adopted the position that if PBS stations go out of business, some of the programming we now offer will be absorbed by cable channels like A&E, the Discovery Channel or pay channels."¹¹¹ While the concern was real, public television remained vibrant and vital. Just as public television did not completely eliminate net-

108 See *CableVision*, April 11, 1988, 26. Also see Alison Leigh Cowan, "CTW Romps onto Cable with 'Encyclopedia,'" *New York Times*, September 18, 1988.

109 *CableVision*, December 21, 1987. This was another Canadian-American co-production.

110 See Dana Heller, "Films," in Edgerton and Jones, *Essential HBO Reader*, 42–51.

111 "PBS in Siberia," *CableVision*, March 30, 1987 (partial reprint of an original address given on February 17, 1987).

work television's cultural programming, cable television did not make public television obsolete.

Today, we see that HBO continues to draw upon public television programming through partnerships with the Sesame Workshop and CTW. HBO licensed reruns of the 2009 reboot of the CTW production *The Electric Company* (PBS Kids Go!, 2009–2011) to expand HBO's on-demand library offerings of children's programming. In 2018, HBO also licensed the American broadcast of *Esme & Roy* (Treehouse TV, 2018–2021; HBO, 2018–2019; HBO Max, 2020–2021), a Canadian cartoon co-produced by the Sesame Workshop. In the contemporary race for content, HBO is working to create an expansive library that will lure and retain subscribers. Whether in the cable revolution then or the streaming revolution now, HBO relies heavily on original and exclusive content. In both of these eras, HBO has, at least in part, borrowed the programming logics of PBS. This historical context enables a better understanding of television's current moment and, hopefully, critical thinking about its future.

On February 9, 2019, HBO announced the television premiere of Morgan Neville's documentary about PBS stalwart Fred Rogers, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018), along with a special arrangement with PBS: "HBO will honor Fred Rogers' contribution and commitment to public television with a special presentation of the film on PBS' *Independent Lens*, coinciding with the HBO debut."¹¹² The press release quotes Neville, who says, "We are excited to have such a great partner in HBO to help spread Fred's message back into the world. And we're especially excited that HBO has forged a unique collaboration with PBS to ensure that the film reaches the broadest possible audience in February." As this article's detailed history of HBO's early years has pointed out, it is debatable how "unique" this collaboration really is. This is far from the first time that HBO and PBS shared content or programming logics, and if history is any indication, it will likely not be the last.

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112 WarnerMedia Entertainment, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?, The Acclaimed Story of Fred Rogers and 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Debuts Feb. 9 on HBO," press release, December 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/hbo-cinemax-pr/wont-you-be-my-neighbor-4645164387b5>.