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Where Can Elmo Learn More?: *Sesame Street's* Elmo as Collector of Information

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An ideological analysis was performed on four episodes of Elmo's World taped in mid-March 2006. The analysis reveals that Elmo pursues information with vigor, as if he is on a quest. He encourages viewers to join him in experiencing the "essential force of the clan," as a group of collectors might call it. Elmo is enthusiastic at all times about his desire to learn. A less avid, more thoughtful pursuit of information is discouraged. Once one piece of information is discussed, Elmo is quickly on to the next one. Elmo seeks information with urgency; he has to know something immediately. The newness of the information is more valuable than its applicability. Elmo's single-minded pursuit of information makes him a perfect candidate for a lifetime of consumption. Consumption is seen as natural, as favored. Elmo doesn't ask permission; he just acquires. Elmo's approach to learning is not surprising, especially when public education has been reduced to simple acquisition of enough facts to pass a standardized test. The producers of Sesame Street *have chosen to prepare preschoolers for this environment, rather than try to encourage critical thinking. To accomplish this, consumption must be made to seem like the natural way to navigate through the early stages of life.*

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A Larger Life

Elmo is one of the most popular characters on *Sesame Street*, which recently marked its 35th anniversary on PBS (www.pbs.org). Elmo is perhaps the most widely merchandised of the show's well-known contingent of "muppets," appearing on a vast array of products – everything from diapers to children's clothing to *Sesame Street* CD's to Band-Aids. Elmo-themed toys like "Tickle Me Elmo" and 2005's "Hokey Pokey Elmo" are among the most sought after toys during each Christmas season.

The popularity of these toys occurs against a backdrop, say some scholars, of children making more buying decisions within the family. Children, notes author Juliet Schor (www.bc.edu/~schor) "have become conduits from the consumer marketplace into the household, the link between advertisers and the family purse" (2004). These advertisers are continually refining tactics with which to communicate their messages to children. First and foremost, they inundate children with misleading information. Summarizing this argument, advanced most notably in works by Schor (1998. 2003, 2004), Naomi Klein (2001), and Susan Linn (2003), Buckingham (2007) explains that while children may not be "caught up in a powerful, highly manipulative form of consumer culture that is almost impossible for them to escape" (p. 15), they – or perhaps more accurately, their parents – are told by manufacturers that their spending is justified because these products will empower children.

Pressured to succeed in school, and scheduled in some cases for a staggering array of activities, many spend down time alone, in front of the television, or playing computer games. Along the way, Schor notes, they become a family's "repositories of consumer knowledge and awareness" (p. 11). More troubling, as Robert Wuthnow suggests, kids have become "agents of materialism;" they instruct their parents about what it takes to be a loyal, if undiscriminating, consumer (quoted in Schor, 1998, p. 87).

As a result, many parents have become "more flexible and less authoritarian," Schor argues; they actively seek their children's opinions on a variety of family-related topics, and infrequently turn down their requests, even when those requests are repeated with whiny gusto. Their increased flexibility may enrich their relationships with their kids, but it may also be producing a generation of adults who are dissatisfied with what they have. Parents try to assuage their own guilt for working long hours by trading "treats for togetherness," Schor notes.

It is the child's experience with marketing and their sophistication as consumers that compelled the author to conduct this research. As Schor points out, "[m]ore of daily life is structured by commercial and consumer activities than was true for previous generations," she notes (2004, p. 29). Kids spend more time doing homework, and less time visiting their friends and talking with their parents (p. 31). Much of their time is spent either shopping or talking about shopping. Perhaps we should not be surprised that

more than 40 percent of children who took part in a 1997 study said that they spend "a lot" of time dreaming about being wealthy (p. 37). Being intelligent, even becoming famous, is not as important to our children as being rich. Being "cool," as Schor and Thomas Frank (1998) eloquently explain, has been stripped of most of its rebellion, repackaged, and sold back to kids as something to be derived from the acquisition of things.

Large corporations and "branding" agencies spend a tremendous amount of money developing strategies to reach children; many of these strategies are built around the child's participation, as in the case of "parties" thrown by kids (and paid for by advertising agencies) during which a new "hot" product is discussed. As Buckingham (2007) notes, marketing and advertising professionals use this type of tactic to encourage a feeling of "empowerment" (p. 16) in children. In the eyes of marketers and advertisers, he writes, children are "sophisticated, demanding, and hard to please."

Research Questions

To navigate the shoals of marketing and advertising, a child must be savvy, but not too savvy that they question the value of consuming. While it is true, as Buckingham asserts, that much of the effort to promote products to children is wasted, and that many new children's products fail (p. 18), children are repeatedly presented with a clear idea of what kind of consumer they should be – even in educational programs like *Sesame Street*. As with most of the activities on their busy schedules, children are taught to approach learning with focus and zeal. They must, in short, develop the mindset of a collector.

Several research questions, then, drive this research: Is Elmo, a favorite of so many children, a collector? What does *Elmo's World* ask its viewers to believe about the act of learning? Does Elmo use information or simply acquire it? Does the segment endorse the treatment of information as a commodity?

The Beloved Community

At the heart of *Sesame Street* was the concept of the "beloved community" (http://thekingcenter.com/prog/bc/index.html), where people of all races, income levels, and ethnic backgrounds "reconciled their differences, integrated, cooperated, and coexisted with one another" (p. 4). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. shed new light on this idea during the civil rights movement. Members of the multiracial, multiethnic cast banded together to solve problems and to help each other through tough times, including the death in 1983 of cast member Will Lee (Mr. Hooper).

Joan Gans Cooney, the driving force behind the show, believed that television's ability to reach children could at least chip away at the need to provide adequate preschool education for disadvantaged children. At the time, more than half of the nation's school districts did not offer preschool classes (Mandel, p. 5). Poor children who did not attend preschool classes did not typically do well when they reached grade school. Without this opportunity, they would become trapped in what sociologist Michael Harrington and other scholars called the "cycle of poverty" (quoted in Mandel, p. 6).

Just seven years after *Sesame Street* began its run on PBS, noted communication scholar George Gerbner (1976) had concluded the show was already "the most widely discussed, researched, evaluated – and successful – children's television program" on American television (p. 108). Fisch, Truglio, & Cole (1999) and Fisch & Truglio (2001) note that *Sesame Street* has been the subject of more than 1,000 research studies. An exhaustive summary of this research is beyond the scope of this paper, but several findings are relevant. Coates & Pusser (1975) found that young viewers of *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* were exposed to many examples of positive reinforcement for social behavior. The authors speculated that children who saw these examples were more likely to use positive reinforcement when interacting with others (p. 148). Less conclusive, but still significant evidence, summarized by Fisch & Truglio (2001), suggests that children learn the value of cooperation from sustained viewing of *Sesame Street.* Finally, Wright & Huston (1995) found that children who watch *Sesame Street* are more likely to engage in educational activities, and performed better than children who did not watch the show on tests that measured knowledge of letters and words, math skills, size of vocabulary, and readiness for school.

Neil Postman, writing in 1985, placed the creation of *Sesame Street* in context and urged parents and educators to consider the key differences between learning via *Sesame Street* and in the classroom. It was no surprise that the show is so popular, Postman suggests, since children growing up in the late 1960's had been exposed to so many television commercials. "To those who had not yet been to school, even to those who had just started, the thought of being *taught* [author's emphasis] by a series of commercials did not seem peculiar," he wrote (p. 142). Parents embraced the show because it made them feel less guilty about not limited the amount of television their children could watch, and, more relevant for this paper, "relieved them of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children how to read," Postman contended (p. 142). Educators believed that the show's success in recasting learning as fun would cause children to enjoy school.

As the show accumulated viewers, it also changed the act of learning, Postman suggested. The show, he wrote, encourages neither interaction nor reflection. Viewers learn in the "private preserve" in front of their televisions (p. 143). There is no penalty for not taking part. Further, the focus is on images, not language. And viewers are unable to challenge a point or ask questions of the case, except perhaps in a *Sesame Street* chat room or discussion board. Perhaps more important is Postman's contention that the show's viewers learn in a completely context-free environment. Information is dispensed as though nothing has come before. There are no foundational ideas. "Sequence and continuity," he wrote, give way, to accessibility. Finally, the complexity of ideas is reduced; "there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or, worst of all, endured," Postman argued (p. 147). Above all, information must be made entertaining; learning must be recast as a "vastly amusing" activity (p. 148).

Several recent changes have diminished *Sesame Street's* message of diversity and the power of wonder, and confirmed Postman's contention that television "requires a continuous supply of novel and interesting information" (1982, p. 82) to keep the audience interested. Responding to concerns from parents, educators, and researchers –

and to a drop in ratings – *Sesame Street's* producers in 2001 discarded the show's trademark interwoven story line, where characters would often help each other solve problems, in favor of discrete, recurring segments like *Elmo's World.* The segments run at the same time in every episode. Postman might have claimed that this new approach threatened to disrupt the "delicate balance between authority and curiosity" (p. 89).

Why We Collect

To build a case for Elmo as collector, a brief review of why we collect is in order. Jean Baudrillard has identified several key reasons why many of us seem to be becoming our collections, as he puts it. We collect to reconnect to the past, to "divinity, to nature, to primitive knowledge" (1996, p. 76). Collectibles represent "absolute reality" and "symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy of a centre-point in reality which nourishes all mythological consciousness, all individual consciousness – that phantasy whereby a projected detail comes to stand for the ego, and the rest of the world is then organized around it" (p. 79).

Items in a collection "express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total environment," argue Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 43). The self is a reflection of the things with which we interact. Things "embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users" (p. 2). It would be impossible to try and make sense of "all the feelings, memories, and thoughts that constitute what one is;" To facilitate this task, we use "representations that stand for the vast range of experiences that make up and shape the self." Among those experiences are enhancing knowledge about a subject through acquisition. Social systems are built on these "structures of attention," which are shared among their members.

Collectors make up one such system. The goals of the group shape the selves of those who make up the system, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton contend. Of particular importance to this research is their notion that an object becomes "charged" when we invest our psychic energy in it. Such an investment comes with a cost; we lose part of our ability "to experience the world, to process information, to pursue goals" (p. 8) by investing energy in an object "to the exclusion of other possibilities." Windsor (1994) argues that the collector's perception of the world is at once "fragmented" and "changeable." We pursue a disconnected series of objects that are, when taken together, the keys to our happiness (p. 49). "In this state the attention is drawn hither and thither between different objects of desire without being nourished by the underlying unity experienceable from within," he writes.

Objects, contends Baudrillard, come to have two functions: "to be put to use and to be possessed." If an item no longer has a function, or use value, it "takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection" (p. 86). All objects are roughly the same. This is a problem for collectors: they seek items for their collection knowing there is a nearly endless string of items left to collect. The only satisfaction comes from collecting more – the "hunt," as collectors call it. An item is not fully realized until it is part of a collection.

Clusters of collectors become "centers of accumulated energy," according to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (p. 35). They are carried away by the "essential force of the clan," a force that gives them their sense of purpose. They differentiate themselves, rather than integrating themselves and their passion, threatening the links between the self and the "vast purposes of the environment," as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton contend. They pursue control – and sustain connectedness with the collecting community – "at the expense of relatedness with other purposes" (p. 39).

Method

An ideological analysis was performed in late 2006 on a convenience sample of four episodes of *Elmo's World* taped in mid-March during the 2006 television season from WHYY-TV (www.whyy.org), the larger of two public broadcasting stations in Philadelphia. Since all *Elmo's World* segments follow the same format, treating subjects in exactly the same way, culling additional segments would not have enhanced the analysis. Elmo's interactions with *Sesame Street* characters during other segments of the show were not analyzed.

Stuart Hall (1986, p. 15) defines *ideology* as "the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works." Those subordinate to society's dominant institutions "appear to support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, cultural and political meanings which bind them to, and `incorporate' them into, the prevailing structures of power" (Storey, 1998, p. 124). What we see as "normal discourse," then, sustains the ideology.

Grossberg (1991) notes that ideology "works as a practice, not merely by producing a system of meanings which purport to represent the world but rather, by producing its own system of meanings as the real, natural (i.e. experienced) one" (p. 145). Challenges to the dominant ideology seem abnormal, as Foss contends. Certain ideologies become dominant, to the exclusion of ideologies that present alternative perspectives; these are marginalized or suppressed. One way of "seeing the world" holds sway – it achieves hegemony, as Antonio Gramsci would argue. Hegemony is a "condition in process" that enables dominant institutions to exercise "moral and intellectual leadership" (Storey 1998, p. 124). Through ideology, powerful groups can exercise control over individuals through what Sonja Foss refers to as "symbolic coercion" (p. 294). "A dominant ideology controls what participants see as natural or obvious by establishing the norm," she argues (p. 295).

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ideologies "must be constructed, renewed, reinforced, and defended continually through the use of rhetorical strategies and practices," as Foss explains (p. 295).

Texts like *Elmo's World* invite preferred readings that encourage the formation of subject positions – the manner in which members of the audience are positioned to receive and interpret a text. The meaning found in Elmo is "constructed, given, produced through cultural practices; it is not simply found in things," as du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus contend (1997, p. 14). The ideology embedded in the texts moves viewers toward interpretations of the experiences desired by the program's producers.

Foss (1996, p. 297) argues that to adequately describe the emergence of an ideology, the researcher must explore the preferred reading of the text, first by asking, "What does the artifact ask the audience to believe, understand, feel, or think about?" The researcher turns to an exploration of whose interests are represented in the text. Foss contends that special attention should be paid to those groups whose interests come to form the dominant ideology and those groups whose interests are "negated" or "unexpressed." Finally, the researcher should explore the "rhetorical features that promote one ideology over others" (p. 297), recognizing that while the emergence of a hegemonic perspective does permit the development of opposing views, it "defines the limits within which" those views are expressed (Cloud, 1994, p. 304).

The Perceptible World

Millions of toddlers and young children (and their parents) have tuned in since November 1998 to watch *Elmo's World*, a *Sesame Street* segment in which Elmo, his fish, Dorothy, his hyperkinetic and flexible friend, Mister Noodle (played by noted stage actor Bill Irwin), and his *Sesame Street* friends learn new concepts and explore the world around them. The format of the segment does not change day to day; only the subject of the segment is different. *Elmo's World* typically is the last extended segment of each *Sesame Street* episode.

Elmo's energetic quest for information takes place in what we are led to believe is his room in his family's apartment. The room's features – door, windows, the floor, the furniture – as well as the show's title card are drawn in crayon. Elmo tells everyone how happy is to see everyone, and asks his viewers, "do you know what Elmo (or Dorothy) is thinking about today?" The answer – food, music, getting dressed, taking a bath, animals – is announced with vocal flourish (ya-ta-ta-da!) and an empathic head spin, as the subject for that day's segment.

For the 10-15 minutes that each segment lasts, he is disconnected from the world of *Sesame Street* – outside the "beloved community." He and Dorothy (introduced in each segment through a close-up of her bowl) are isolated, with the exception of short visits from babies (to whom Elmo poses a question about the subject of the day), periodic visits from *Sesame Street* characters like Bert, Ernie, and Big Bird (often accomplished via email delivered by a mercurial personal computer), and encounters with talking versions of the day's subject – a pogo stick, for example, when the day's subject is jumping.

Other children visit Elmo, but their contact usually takes the form of short video segments that explain the subject designated by Elmo. Elmo also receives videos from his television friends about a subject. Rather than call them on the phone, or talk to them in person, he relies on email and video. In one segment, Elmo told his viewers about how his friends liked to play ball – one friend, Michelle, had played catch with her father, "and told Elmo all about it." No matter what form this contact takes, the participants are enthusiastic about taking part in the activity. This enthusiasm only increases (if that is possible) Elmo's desire to learn more about the topic at hand. In one segment, Elmo shows a video of his friend, Harry Monster, who helps Elmo answer the question, "what would a ball look like without all the air inside?" Elmo, who shot the video with his own video camera (and inadvertently positioned a furry finger in the corner of the frame), thanks Harry for his excellent "squishing" job. Back in his room, Elmo confides that he "likes the ball better when there is lots of air in it."

The Quest

Elmo pursues information with vigor, as if he is a collector on a quest for an item. He encourages his viewers to join him in experiencing the "essential force of the clan." Elmo is enthusiastic about his desire to learn. A less avid pursuit of information is discouraged. Once one piece of information is discussed, Elmo is quickly on to the next one. He asks, "Where can Elmo learn more?" or "How can we find out even more?" Topics that fall outside the subject of the day are not discussed. Only jumping, or pizza, or music, are discussed. Elmo does not veer off on tangents. Segments of *Elmo's World* do not relate to other topics discussed in a *Sesame Street* episode. To borrow a phrase from the political sphere, he stays "on message." His urgency suggests the "teach to the test" path taken by many teachers today as they struggle to help students meet the federal government's controversial educational performance standards.

Elmo's interaction primarily with images – of his *Sesame Street* friends, his "real world" friends, even the puppets that visit him via email – tied with his separation from the rest of the world, suggests that his lust for information is played out in two layers of "spectacle," as Guy Debord defines the term. Elmo's relationship with his friends is indeed "mediated" by the images he receives (1990, p. 12), just as a viewer's relationship with Elmo mediates the relationship with other members of his or her family. Elmo's cartoon room and its contents – most notably his TV and computer – replace the "perceptible world" (p. 26) of *Sesame Street*, just as interacting with Elmo replaces a viewer's "perceptible world." The images Elmo sees are "superior" to those he could find elsewhere. Likewise, Elmo's quest for learning suggests to kids and their parents that *Elmo's World* is far superior to their day-to-day world as a place for learning. As Best and Kellner argue, spectacle "is integrally connected to the concept of separation, for in passively consuming spectacles, one is separated from other people and from actively producing one's life (1997, p. 84).

More significantly, Elmo's zest for learning suggests that the parents who watch him have decided that his is the learning model they will adopt for their children, with all of its flaws. As Debord (1995) notes, spectacle is "the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that

choice" (p. 13). A parent's trust in Elmo comes at least in part from *Sesame Street's* reputation as an excellent educational program, which is derived from a parent's collection of memories about the show.

The "Right Thing"

Elmo seeks information with urgency – he has to know something immediately. He rarely focuses on a fact for more than a few seconds, behavior admittedly quite typical of a young child. But as Windsor suggests, Elmo's attention is "drawn hither and thither between different objects of desire" (p. 49). He does not perceive that the subjects he deals with may be connected. This may be too much to expect from a toddler-muppet on a children's show, but Elmo's approach may suggest to children that the depth of information and its possible use in other contexts, are not valuable.

The newness of the information acquired by Elmo is more valuable than its lasting value, or its applicability. In this way, Elmo resembles individuals bent on acquiring the latest fruits of technological advancement. Like the consumer who blithely comes back to buy a new device after the previous device has been rendered obsolete, Elmo collects information without thinking about whether it will matter in the future, or whether a new answer might materialize to his question in the future. To borrow from Postman, Elmo's creators do not encourage their young viewers to ask the question, "what is the question for which technology (or information about feet) is the answer?"

Elmo also resembles an avid collector who adjusts, and in some cases discards, an item's historical context as a collection is expanded. It does not matter to Elmo where a piece of information comes from, so long as he can obtain it, digest it, and move on. Thus, the pieces of information Elmo gathers are treated like collectibles to put on a shelf. He wants them so that he can learn more. He acquires them, ponders them briefly, then quickly moves on to the next nugget of information. Like a collector, Elmo has a clearly enunciated goal: to learn more, as he says several times during each segment.

The bits of information Elmo obtains are rarely connected to each other, and are rarely contextualized for the viewer. Elmo does not refer in subsequent segments to facts learned in previous episodes. Viewers learn *about* something, but are not taught what having that knowledge now means, or where the knowledge can be deployed. Elmo accumulates; he does not integrate his information. Elmo's focus is the information, not its potential uses. He allows the information to distract him, so that he is not "nourished by the underlying unity experienceable from within," as Windsor argues (1994, p. 49).

Information – lots of it – is the "right thing" (Windsor's term, p. 52) for a budding collector like Elmo to have. It is the key, so our business leaders and television advertisements tell us, to making our way in an increasingly information-driven society. Accumulating so much information will also serve Elmo well when he eventually gets to school and is asked to unquestioningly regurgitate the information in order to pass a standardized test. But at what cost? As Postman explained, "information is dangerous when it has no place to go, when there is no theory to which it applies, no pattern in which it fits, when there is no higher purpose that it serves" (1992, p. 63). Asking a baby

is a charming part of *Elmo's World*, but it signals that Elmo is interested only in acquiring and experiencing information in its raw form. He is not interested in the credibility of the source, and actually gets very little out of the information.

An Identity-Cocoon

Elmo seems to be carving out an identity based on the bits of information that he acquires. Windsor might argue that Elmo is busily constructing an "identity-cocoon" (p. 62) in which he can display his collection of information. He primarily experiences the information only within the confines of his room, and relies on his video visitors to expand his range of experiences. These visitors, along with Mr. Noodle and Elmo's *Sesame Street* friends, come together to form a close collecting community that does not seem inclined (at least within the confines of the show) to share the information they have accumulated. Such an approach echoes Schor (2003, p. 185), who argues that we no longer compare our possessions and our status with our neighbors' – we now try to keep up with colleagues in the workplace, and to attend to the "consumer cues" provided by television. It is not surprising, then, that Elmo is unlikely to put his information to use to serve "the vast purposes of the environment," as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton call it. Elmo and his friends are indeed members of a "center of accumulated energy" who are happiest gathering, rather than discussing, new additions to their collections.

Television is an authoritative source of information for Elmo. It would probably not surprise the reader to learn that *Sesame Street* would promote an ideology that favors learning through television. "TV," as Elmo calls it, is typically the last "guest" to appear during *Elmo's World* – there to confirm for Elmo the validity of all that has come before. The segment also resembles a television talk show, complete with guests and sidekicks (Dorothy, Mr. Noodle). Elmo does not stop his "hunt" until it is presented to him on television. Only after watching what amounts to a "niche" channel that features engagingly presented information (usually voiced by *Second City Television* cast member Andrea Martin) about the topic of the day, does Elmo gather his guests around his crayon piano for a concluding singalong that celebrates the day's successful acquisition of information – or perhaps the day's successful acquisition.

Postman might have been troubled by the fact that Elmo is already adept at learning through television. "Watching television," he wrote, "not only requires no skills but develops no skills" (1982, p. 79). The "Singing Channel" and the "Feet Channel" – the targeted programming suggests the narrowcasting seen on cable television – do not demand a great deal of Elmo or his friends. As Postman noted (p. 78), "People watch television. They do not read it. Nor do they listen to it. They watch it." Not only does Elmo have a television in his room, like so many of his viewers (more than one-quarter of kids have a television in their room, write Kelly and Kulman (2004) note), Elmo has cable television – and access to the internet. The segment seems based on the assumption that his viewers are similarly equipped. Thus, Elmo does not have to venture outside his room – to the library, perhaps, or to school – to learn or to gather information. It is all right there. Despite the fact that his apartment building looks a bit rundown, Elmo exists in a privatized world of information technology.

It's not surprising, then, that Elmo stares at the set and waits for his beloved "TV" to dispense the requested information. Again, no extraneous information is allowed – only information that enhances Elmo's understanding of the subject at hand – and, by extension, persuades him that having is better than living. Elmo learns early on that it is possible to insulate oneself from information that one does not like, or finds challenging – this might spoil an environment so conducive to instant gratification. It is an environment that clearly prepares Elmo for a lifetime of status-driven shopping – or maybe for the inevitable journey to attending the "right" school(s).

Attached to His Cleverness

At first glance, Elmo is more than a little self-absorbed. The lyrics to the *Elmo's World* (a slight variation on the lyrics to Elmo's theme song) are laced with third-person references ("This is the song, la la la la – Elmo's song…"). The theme song recurs throughout each segment – it is played by a puppet marching band in a segment on music, and by a child learning to play the violin. Elmo is featured in all of Dorothy's purported dreams about the subject of the day ("Dorothy is imagining Elmo jumping out of a plane…"). And while Elmo is grateful for the information provided during video segments featuring his "real-life" friends, he often quickly ends their encounters in order to move on to the next acquisition. "Elmo and Alex are very good friends," says Elmo about Alex, who is deaf, during a segment on ears, "but Elmo wants to learn more about ears – where can Elmo learn more?"

Thus, Elmo is a fairly typical contemporary child – acquisitive, sometimes crabby, and with an extremely short attention span. More important, Elmo seems quite skilled at using his relationships as a springboard to obtain information – to propel him further on his "hunt," as a collector would call it. Windsor (1994, p. 64) argues that collectors "are likely to be as attached to their own cleverness as their own collectibles." So is Elmo simply showing off his ability to obtain information? Is he isolating himself from his friends in order to continue his quest for information? Is the self-reflexivity at work in *Elmo's World* a nod to the growing tendency of kids to see themselves as consumers – as their own brands, as Hakanen (2006) argues? Instead of reveling in the love of learning, or learning just for the sake of learning, Elmo conveys the impression that having information – and letting the world know he has it – is enough to sustain him. He is laying the groundwork for a lifetime of defining himself through the objects. In his song, he sings, "Elmo loves his goldfish…his crayon, too." Not his mommy or daddy – things.

Conclusions

Energized by "the essential force of the clan," (Csikszenthmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 39). Elmo hunts disconnected bits of information without any sense of its impact. Consumption is seen as natural, as favored. Elmo doesn't ask permission; he just acquires. Elmo's approach to learning is not surprising, especially at a time when a public education has been reduced to simple acquisition of enough facts to pass a standardized test. The producers of *Sesame Street*, supported by their educational advisors, have chosen to prepare preschoolers for this environment, rather than try to

encourage critical thinking. To accomplish this, consumption must be made to seem like the natural way to navigate through the early stages of life.

In *Elmo's World*, Elmo is free to accumulate information on any subject, without limits. He is a self-directed learner, as a reviewer insightfully pointed out, but there is a complete lack of guidance or mediation. Elmo consumes; he does not necessarily learn. His unchecked curiosity does not, as Postman suggested, turn into cynicism or arrogance (1982, p. 91). Instead, it turns into more curiosity, fueled by the treatment of information as commodity – it becomes a manifestation of "the essential force of the clan." He brings a collector's single-mindedness to the act of learning. Liberal Baby Boomers swore they would do their best not to raise children like Elmo – prematurely empowered children who want everything, and have no compunction about repeatedly asking for it. There is no expert guidance, as Postman suggested. The only adult in the segment – Mr. Noodle – needs the help of Elmo and his friends in order to complete simple tasks. The children have the answers. Elmo is quite capable of making decisions about which subjects to explore. He needs only the support of the "collecting" community that he assembles during the stops on his quest. Would we expect anything less from small adults? Elmo's approach resembles the "anti-adultism" purportedly advanced by marketers in their push to convince kids of their own autonomy. Buckingham (2007) eloquently explains this idea: "Adults are boring. Kids are fun. Adults are conservative; kids are fresh and innovative. Adults will never understand; kids intuitively know" (p. 16).

Sesame Street certainly deserves praise for its efforts to engage children and to promote cross-cultural understanding (Kraidy, 2002), but the popularity of *Elmo's World* – and the feverish merchandising of Elmo himself – suggests that the show has completed, for its characters at a thematic level, the move from the "beloved community" to a place where interaction is just a backdrop for consumption. Parents are so consumed by *Sesame Street's* cultural authority and mythic power – its influence "reproduced" in learning-centered activities (Lull, 2003, p. 62) – that they have not paid sufficient attention to the show's assertion of a market-driven ideology under which information is to be treated as a commodity. Somehow they missed, or refused to acknowledge, as Lull would suggest, the successful challenge to the show's previously softer, less structured approach to learning mounted by producers and educational experts.

Segments like *Elmo's World* normalize wanting and having, and marginalize learning for the sake of learning, and, more important, nurturing a sense of wonder in children – an element at the heart of *Sesame Street* during its first years on the air. The segment asks us to believe that learning should be broken down into discrete, disconnected, entertaining one-dimensional episodes. More significantly, it suggests that the method endorsed by Elmo has been the best way to learn all along. This approach suggests that viewers abandon meanings they hold about the show and adopt a discourse about education that promotes rote learning and the unthinking acquisition of information.

The significance of accolades earned by *Sesame Street* for its almost unparalleled success in engaging children fade in significance when Congress threatens to slash

funding thanks to complaints about PBS content from an aggrieved few. It is no surprise, then, that in *Elmo's World*, learning is an act of hurried acquisition; such an educational approach will not cause controversy, especially now that Elmo and his *Sesame Street* friends have been cowed into eating more healthy foods. Spending fifteen minutes discussing the intricacies of the foot will not provoke the ire of the Parents Television Council and similar like-minded groups.

Elmo's World promotes a worldview in which success can be had if one is intense, focused, on message, and acquisitive – in short, a collector. Elmo approaches learning as a collector approaches a long desired addition to a collection – as something to be hunted, acquired, and displayed. Learning, Debord would argue, is a spectacle, with an attendant focus on "appearances," and mediated by the images hurdled at us in *Elmo's World.* This is a long way from leveling the playing field of learning for disadvantaged children. Experiencing information while consumed by "the essential force of the clan" comes without a sense of wonder about how the world works.

The urgency seen in Elmo's collecting certainly mirrors the urgency felt by millions of young students who prepare feverishly to take the tests whose results purportedly show whether their teachers and schools, struggling to meet accountability standards influenced significantly by the business community, are any good. But Elmo should do quite well in school when he's old enough. He will work hard, and log long hours, but he may never learn how to learn, or think critically. He will be left with dusty shelves of disparate information. But having mastered collecting, he is still primed to become a loyal consumer. He is not so much a "victim of consumer culture," as Buckingham suggests (2007, p. 17), as consumer culture's insinuation into places of learning.

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