

Brought to you by the Letter “R”

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last week, ‘Sesame Street’ celebrated its 40th birthday. I absolutely loved Sesame Street as a kid. Every day I played with my Fischer-Price Sesame Street Little People. I even had a stuffed Grover that I brought everywhere.

I loved Sesame Street because it had colorful, silly puppets, catchy songs and was just plain fun. I didn’t realize I was learning while watching, too. I’m confident that what little Spanish I know came from watching Sesame Street.

Sesame Street was a vanguard in children’s television. It certainly wasn’t the first TV show aimed at kids – Howdy Doody, Bozo the Clown and my dad’s favorite, Soupy Sales, all came first. Sesame Street was, however, the first children’s show that really tried to educate children. In addition to Spanish, Grover, Big Bird, Bert and Ernie also taught us numbers, letters and even manners.

In the 1980s, I grew out of Sesame Street and started watching cartoons geared for older boys, like ‘G.I. Joe,’ ‘Transformers,’ and ‘He-Man.’ My dad called them half-hour commercials, and they had little to no educational value. Girls didn’t have much better choices either, as ‘My Little Pony,’ ‘Strawberry Shortcake,’ and ‘Rainbow Brite’ were pretty much the same.

That’s why in 1990, Congress passed the Children’s Television Act. The CTA was designed to increase the amount of educational and informational programming on television for kids. Even though I knew after watching the 30-second PSAs at the end of G.I. Joe not to talk to strangers (and knowing is half the battle), apparently that lesson was overshadowed by the 20 minutes of mild violence that preceded it.

Congress passed the CTA after learning that children in the U.S. spent approximately three hours a day watching television. The Act requires each broadcast television station to serve the educational and informational needs of children through its overall programming, and it tasked the Federal Communications Commission with developing rules to carry out the CTA’s goals.

The FCC first developed the concept of “core programming,” which it defined as programming specifically designed to serve the educational and informational needs of children age 16 and younger. Core programs must be at least 30 minutes in length, be aired between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., and be a regularly scheduled weekly program.

Television stations are required to air at least three hours of core programming per week. Core programs are identified by displaying throughout the show an “E/I” icon denoting that the program is “educational and/or informational.” The FCC also requires stations to provide information identifying these programs to publishers of program guides and TV listings.

Stations are also only allowed to air commercial material, such as advertisements, during children’s television programming of 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays. These limitations are prorated for programs that are shorter than one hour in duration.

Congress updated the CTA so that starting on January 1, 2007, requirements imposed on television broadcasters have also been applied to both analog and digital broadcast and cable television systems, while the minimum amount of core programming from digital multicast broadcasters will increase in proportion to the amount of free video programming offered.

The FCC is purportedly investigating my mother’s claims that watching too much television will turn your brain to mush and sitting too close to it will make you go blind.

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